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by Joseph Chadwick

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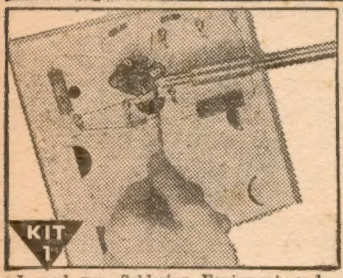

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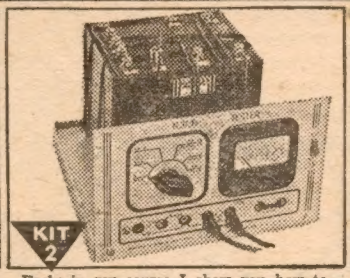

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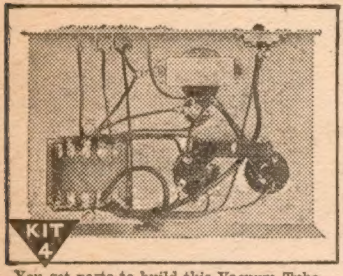

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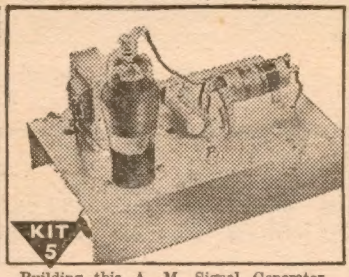

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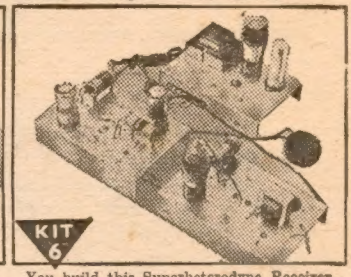

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MARCH, 1948 VOL. 4, NO. 1

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Cover Painted by H. W. Scott

M. R. Bindamin, *Editor* **Frank Armer, *Publisher***

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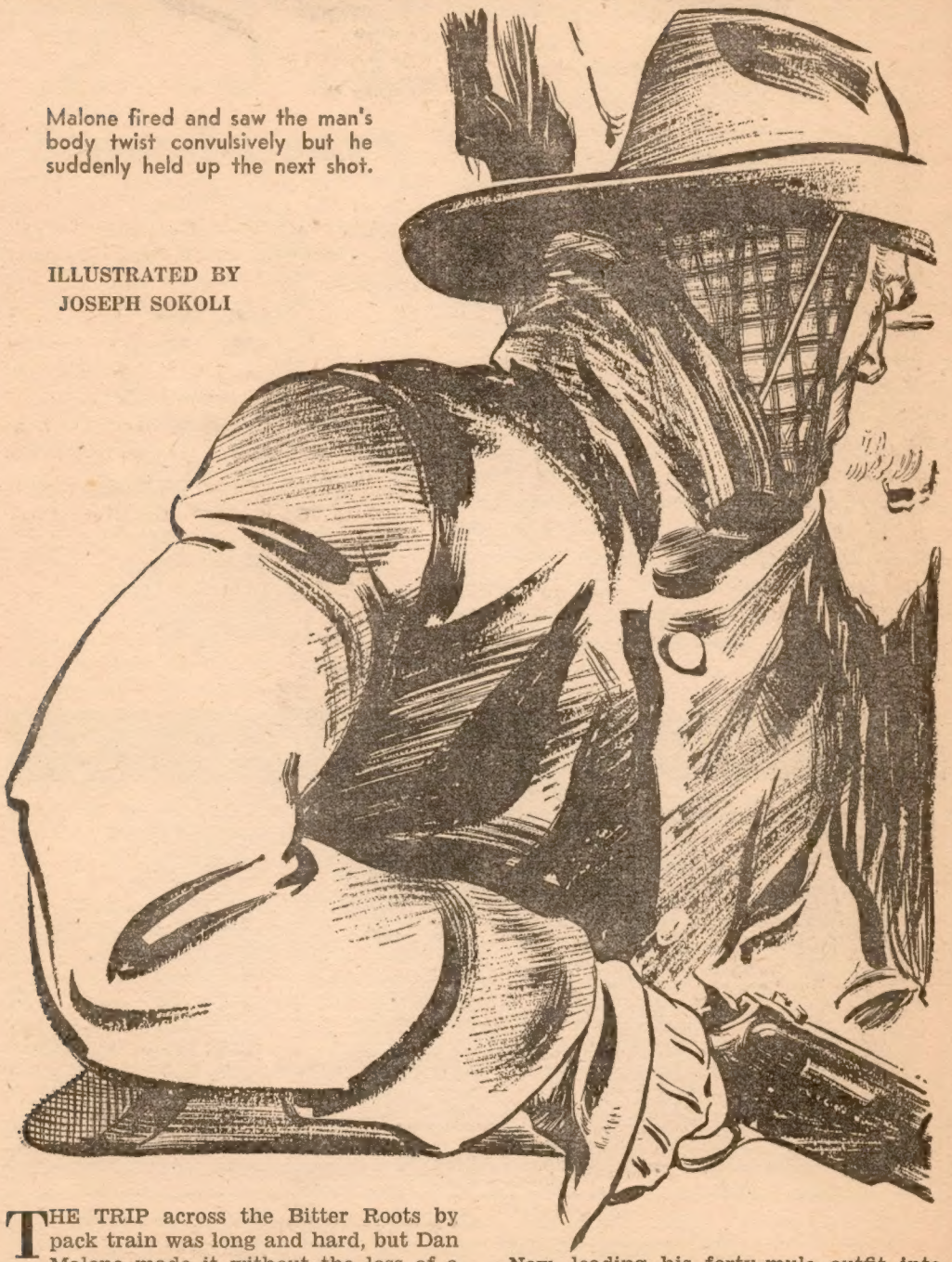
BONANZA TRAIL



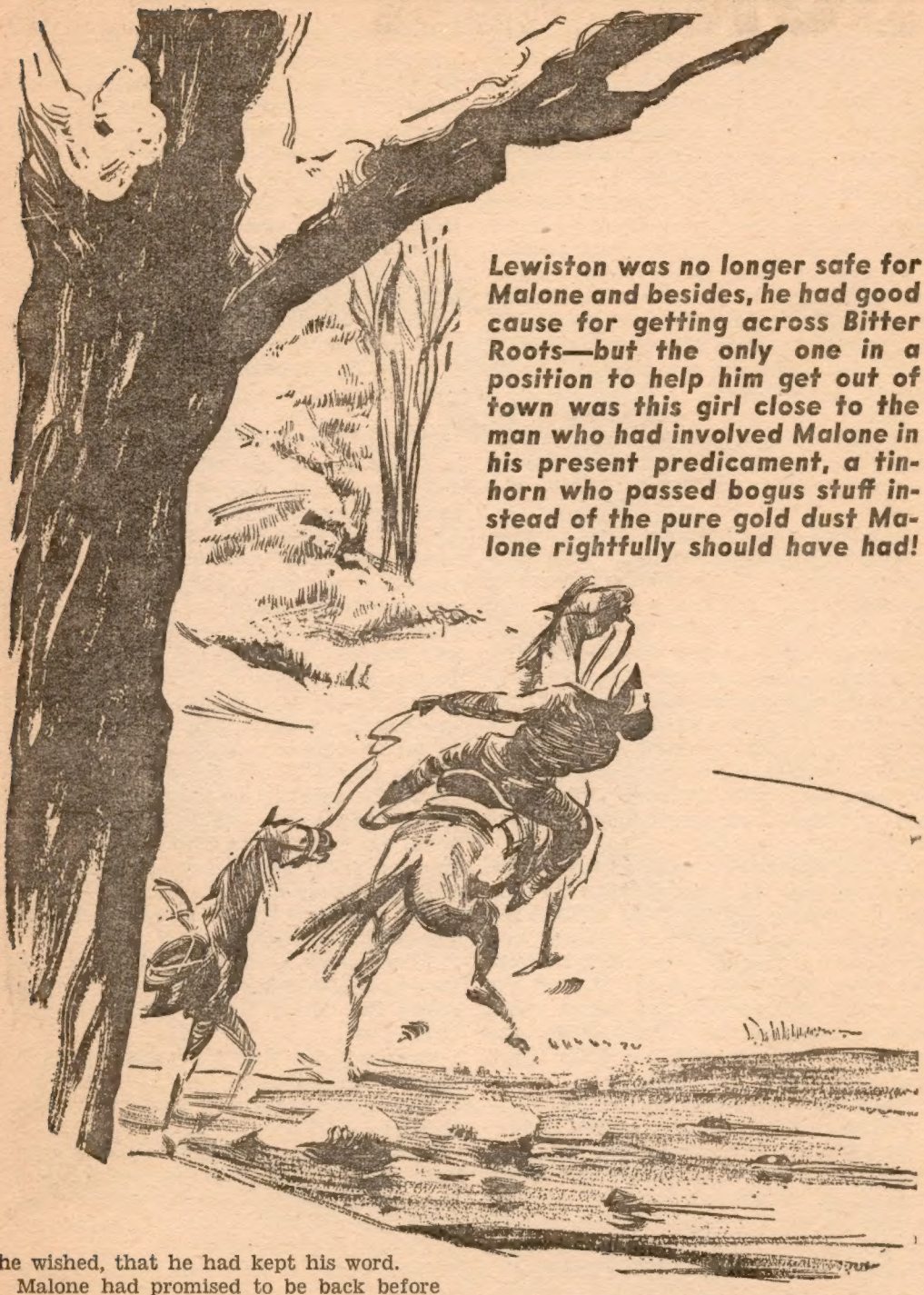
Malone fired and saw the man's body twist convulsively but he suddenly held up the next shot.

ILLUSTRATED BY
JOSEPH SOKOLI

THE TRIP across the Bitter Roots by pack train was long and hard, but Dan Malone made it without the loss of a single pound of freight or, on the way back, an ounce of dust.

Now, leading his forty-mule outfit into the jump-off place, Lewiston, in Idaho Territory, the big boss-packer could boast, if

By JOSEPH CHADWICK



Lewiston was no longer safe for Malone and besides, he had good cause for getting across Bitter Roots—but the only one in a position to help him get out of town was this girl close to the man who had involved Malone in his present predicament, a tinhorn who passed bogus stuff instead of the pure gold dust Malone rightfully should have had!

he wished, that he had kept his word.

Malone had promised to be back before snow blocked the mountain passes, bringing with him gold enough to pay for the goods he'd obtained on credit from the mercantile house of Barton & Sloan.

This was the night of October the first. Malone was in ahead of the snow but there was a chill drizzle, and through it the lights of the town were hazy yellow patches. The main street was a quagmire, with an occasional puddle of muddy water extending from one plank sidewalk to the other. Malone swung his horse alongside the lead mule, loosened the ropes holding a bulging leather pouch to the jenny's pack saddle.

He grunted, heaving the pouch over to rest before him on the sorrel's saddle, and wondered if fifty pounds of gold were heavier than fifty pounds of something else. It seemed so. There was that much dust, troy weight, in the pouch.

Malone called out to the nearest of his four packers, "Sam, take the string to Harmon's Corral! I'll be down there to pay off you boys, soon as I settle with Barton and Sloan."

He swung over to the mercantile house, a squat plank building with a rickety false front to give it an appearance of height. He dismounted, slid the gold pouch from the saddle to his shoulder, and walked into Barton & Sloan's. A bell tinkled overhead as Malone opened and closed the door. Only one of the ceiling lamps was lighted, against the chance of a late customer, and the fire in the too-small pot-bellied stove was no higher than was necessary to take the edge off the night's chill dampness. Eli Barton and Josh Sloan were penny-wise New Englanders.

Malone rapped his knuckles against a tin spice cannister upon the counter. He sang out, "It's Malone, gents! Come and get it!"

Moving faster than Malone had ever seen them move before, the partners came from the cubby-hole office at the rear of the big stock-cluttered store. Eli Barton was a scrawny, grayish man. Josh Sloan was equally thin but he had a reddish beard that gave him a rusty look.

"Dan, my boy!" exclaimed Barton.

"Welcome back, friend!" echoed Sloan.

Enthusiasm was a rare thing in this pair. Malone remembered that they had shown none at all in mid-summer, when he had started on the three-hundred-mile trip to the mining camps beyond the Bitter Roots. They hadn't trusted him. It had taken Malone a full month to argue them into letting him have the merchandise on credit.

Still, he didn't blame them. Honest men couldn't easily be sorted out from the sharpers that were coming into the Territory. As yet, in '63, Congress had failed to provide a penal code for the new territory it had created. Without laws to hold men honest, it was merely good judgment to be careful in making any sort of deal.

Malone shook hands with each of the merchants. He saw how they eyed the pouch on his shoulder.

"Get out your gold scales," he said, "and we'll settle up."

"That's all dust?" Barton asked.

"A straight fifty pounds of it, friend."

"I wouldn't believe it, if I didn't see it," said Sloan.

NOTHING could bring a gleam to a man's eyes as gold did. Malone watched the brightness on the faces of these two partners who, after more than half a century of life, hadn't lost their love for the yellow metal. What gold could buy wasn't important to them; mere possession was what counted. Malone filled and lighted his pipe after placing the pouch on the counter, and watched the dust weighed out. He owed Barton and Sloan a straight five-thousand dollars for the merchandise he had sold in the mining country. Too, he owed wages to his four packers and to Clem Harmon at the Corral Livery, for the hire of the mules. He expected to have about thirty-six hundred dollars left for himself. A nice profit for three and a half months' work. It was a better way of making money than panning for color at the diggings. Staple goods were easy to sell at high prices in the mining country.

It took quite a while to weigh out five-thousand dollars worth of dust on the gold scales. But finally Barton and Sloan had their share.

"You satisfied that the weighing out is right?" Barton asked.

"Sure," said Malone. "I trust you gentlemen."

He tied the draw-cord on the pouch that now weighed less than half its original weight. He said, "Well, I'll be off," and slung the pouch over his shoulder. The merchants exchanged a look and a nod.

"How about another trip, Dan?" Barton asked.

"In the Spring," Malone told him. "It's too late in the season to buck the moun-

tains. I wouldn't risk the lives of my packers and myself in those mountain blizzards."

"You could get through before the first snow," Sloan urged, "if you started out right away! You could put up in one of the mining camps until Spring, then come out for another load of goods."

Malone puffed on his pipe, shook his head. "I'm heading south," he said. "I aim to winter in California—maybe in Frisco, where a man can have some fun for his money."

Both Barton and Sloan looked pained. They were straight-laced and couldn't approve of a man squandering gold on the fleshpots. But Malone gave them no chance to argue with him. He said, "I'll see you in the Spring," and strode from the store.

He rode through the rainy dark to Harmon's Corral, turned his horse over to the hostler, then paid Clem Harmon for the hire of the mules. He told the fat liveryman, "I'll want them again in the Spring, Clem, and maybe ten or twenty more." He paid off his four men, giving each five ounces of dust extra as a bonus. He settled with the blackbearded Sam Brannon, his best packer, last of all, and afterward, shook hands with him.

"I'll look you up in the Spring, Sam."

"You're not staying in Lewiston?" Brannon asked, seeming surprised. "I figured you would, now that this woman's here. Or didn't you see her?"

"What woman?" Malone demanded, staring at the man.

"All I know is that she came out of the Empire House when we hazed the string past," Brannon said. "And she asked for you."

Malone was frowning, trying to think of some woman who had reason to see him.

"A stranger in town?" he asked.

Brannon nodded. "And a looker," he said. "I figured she was somebody you knew in Portland or Frisco or somewhere. I told her you'd come by the hotel, that she should watch for you."

"Well, I'll see her," Malone said.

He was sure there was some mistake.

Like most men in the gold country, he knew only honkatonk girls. And he never permitted any of them to get any sort of a hold on him.

The woman was keeping watch on the awninged porch of the Empire House. Evidently she had missed him when he passed before because he had been mounted and she was looking for a man afoot.

Malone had a good picture of her as he mounted the porch steps. There was sufficient light from the hotel's parlor windows. She was a tall girl, young, with dark blonde hair, and fashionably dressed. Dan Malone hadn't seen anything like her since his last visit to San Francisco.

She wore a tight-sleeved basque and a wide skirt with a hooped-out hem, both of a dark green material. Her small hat was adorned with plumage of the same color. Her throat was encircled with a narrow band of black velvet. She wore gloves and a cameo brooch. She looked like the product of one of those expensive Parisian dressmakers that catered to the womenfolks of the San Francisco bonanza kings. Malone couldn't help staring.

"Mr. Malone?" she asked. "Mr. Dan Malone?"

Malone said, "Yes," making a question of it. She was young and pretty and she wasn't a honkatonk girl. She smiled upon him.

"I've been waiting three days for you, Mr. Malone," she said. "I was told that you were expected in with a pack-train and that you would probably make another trip to the goldfields. You see—" She gave Malone another sunny smile. "—it's important for me to get to Belle City. Since there are no stages, I thought I could travel with you."

"I'm sorry, Miss—"

"Miss Warden. Hannah Warden."

"It's a three-hundred-mile trip through wild country, Miss Warden," Malone told her. "And no trip for a woman."

"But—"

"I'm not taking a pack-string over the Bitter Roots until Spring," Malone said, giving her no chance to plead with him. "Those mountain trails are too dangerous in winter—and it'll be winter out there any day now."

There was something like fright in Hannah Warden's eyes. "I'll pay you," she said urgently. "I'll pay you well! Five hundred—"

"Not for five thousand," said Malone. "I'm sorry."

CHAPTER II

Gold-coated Lead

AFTERWARD, upstairs in one of the Empire's cubby-hole rooms, Malone felt guilty about it. He should have turned the girl down more gently, been more friendly, explained more fully what the trail was, not one for a girl to take—or Belle City a place for a lady. He took it that Hannah Warden was that, a lady. She certainly seemed like one. He'd never seen a genteel honkatonk girl and if Miss Hannah Warden wasn't properly brought up—well, Dan Malone was fooled the darnedest. But he should have been more polite. He shouldn't have walked away from her so abruptly, leaving her there on the hotel porch with the wind blowing the drizzle of rain in on her.

Malone shaved, stripped, washed up. He'd had some hot water brought up from the kitchen by the Indian woman who was the Empire's chambermaid. He opened his warsack, which he'd brought up from the desk, where he had checked it before starting out on his trip, and pulled on clean flannels and a white shirt. He considered a moment, then picked out his black string tie.

Maybe he was thinking of the girl, when deciding on the tie. He put on his black broadcloth suit, trying to smooth out some of its wrinkles. He surveyed himself in the cracked and blurred wall mirror, then carefully combed his sandy-colored hair which needed a barber's scissors. He was a lean and somewhat angular but not bad-looking sort. *Not bad-looking, at all,* he decided. He'd never before given it much thought.

He took up his hat and, because it wasn't safe to leave anything of value in a hotel room, his gold pouch. He went downstairs, passed through the parlor to the dining-room.

It was past the regular supper hour but Frank Beach, the hotel proprietor, had offered to serve him a meal. Beach came in from the kitchen just as Malone seated himself at the one long dinner table. He had a plate piled high with grub—a steak, potatoes, beans—a smaller one of biscuits, and a cup of black coffee.

"This girl, Frank—"

"Miss Warden?" Beach asked. "She came in by stage from Wallula, after a trip from Portland by riverboat. Claims to be from Philadelphia."

"What's she after in Belle City?"

"She's on her way to marry George Stacey."

Malone was so startled he swore. He knew Stacey; he had had dealings with him while in Belle City, selling some of his merchandise. George Stacey had opened a bank in Belle and called it the Gold Exchange. He stored dust for the placer miners, charging them a small percentage for its safekeeping. It was a clever way to make money without much work; it was also a worthwhile service for the men at the diggings, for by depositing their dust with Stacey they did not need to carry it about with them and run the risk of being robbed or caching it away where it might be stolen. Too, Stacey had a branch office in Portland. A man leaving the gold camps could deposit his dust at the Exchange, take his receipt to the branch office when he reached Portland, and obtain a like amount of dust, specie or currency—thus doing away with the burden and risk of transporting it over a trail prowled by road agents.

A shrewd one, George Stacey.

A man who would get a full share of the gold other men dug or panned.

But when Malone was at Belle City, George Stacey had been spending a lot of time with a honkatonk girl. He hadn't seemed to be much concerned about the girl who was on her way from Philadelphia.

MALONE said, "Does Stacey know she's on her way to Belle?"

Frank Beach shook his head. "She wants to surprise him," he said.

He went out to the parlor, leaving Malone to finish his meal. Malone ate in preoccupied fashion, thinking of the girl and somehow not being able to see her marrying George Stacey. Of course, Stacey wasn't the usual sort of gold boomer. He was well-educated, seemed to have a good background, and if fine manners and dudish clothes made a gentleman, Stacey was that. Also, he was a handsome sort, in a florid way.

All in all, Malone couldn't look back and find anything wrong with the man. Except his being overly friendly with that honkatonk girl. But Malone didn't know why he

couldn't see Miss Hannah Warden becoming Mrs. George Stacey.

He was drinking the last of his coffee when the girl came in. The clatter of her heels on the bare floor, light and quick, made him look up. He saw the determined look on her face and knew that she was going to try to get at him again.

"Mr. Malone—"

"I'm very sorry, Miss Warden," he said, cutting her short. "But I'm not going back over that trail at this time of the year and I advise you not to try to find anybody else to take you."

Her lower lip quivered. Malone was afraid she would break into tears.

"But what—what can I do?"

"You'd beter go back to Portland and stay there until Spring."

"But the winter's so long!"

Malone nodded gravely to that. He guessed that the winter would be long for someone to carry a message to Belle City, for her fiance, when he heard a loud voice speaking his name in the parlor. He also heard Frank Beach saying, "Now, Matt, what's wrong?" He knew then that it was Matt Brule asking for him. Brule was town marshal of Lewiston. Despite the lack of Territorial laws, the town's leading citizens had raised a fund and hired Matt Brule, one-time sheriff at Chico, California, to maintain law and order in the particular settlement. And Brule was a zealous peace officer.

He came striding into the dining-room, a scowl on his heavy face. His overcoat hung unbuttoned and he had his right hand on his holstered gun. He lay a flat look on Malone and growled, "Don't make any trouble, mister! I don't want to have any gun-play with a lady in bullet range."

"What are you getting at, Matt?" Malone asked.

"I'm arresting you."

"What for?" Malone asked, rising.

"You know what for," Brule muttered. "For passing bogus gold dust."

Malone was so jolted by the accusation, and puzzled, too, that he had no thought of resisting arrest. He permitted Matt Brule to search him for a gun, then take him by the arm and lead him from the dining-room.

Malone saw the girl gazing at them in a wide-eyed way. He saw Frank Beach's disbelieving look, heard the hotelman say, "I don't believe Malone would pull anything like that, Marshal."

Matt Brule said, "He pulled it, all right," and opened the street door. He shoved Malone out, followed him. Brule had taken charge of Malone's gold pouch. They turned east along the street, heading for Barton & Sloan's store. The drizzle had turned into a steady downpour.

They entered the store. The two merchants had forgotten the cost and lighted all of their ceiling lamps. John Gresham, the assayer, was with them. Gresham's face had a grave look. He was bending over a glass tray which held a small quantity of gold immersed in some sort of liquid. Beside the tray on the counter was the wooden box into which Barton and Sloan had poured the dust when receiving it from Malone.

The partners were excited. Barton said wildly, "Lucky we tested this dust before he left town!"

"What's wrong with that gold?" Malone demanded.

"It's bogus, that's what!" Sloan said, almost shouting it. "You thieving tinhorn, you almost put it over on us! If we hadn't got some of it a couple weeks ago, we wouldn't have had it tested—and you'd have gotten away with it!"

Malone turned to the assayer. "What's this all about, Gresham?"

Gresham looked up, said soberly, "They called me in right after you gave them the dust, Malone. I picked out some of the biggest nuggets—" He pointed to some pieces of gold the size of a wheat grain. "—and cut them through with a sharp blade. I found lead."

"Lead?" Malone asked frowning. "Who ever saw yellow lead?"

"It's been pulled before," Gresham said drily. "There was a man—a German chemist—in San Francisco, back a couple years ago. He built a machine to cut bar lead into particles the size of shot gold. When the lead was cut up, he galvanized it with gold. That's what you or somebody did with this dust. I've tested some of it with nitric acid, here in this glass. The acid finds the flaws in the gold coating and shows up the lead. You gave Barton and Sloan five thousand dollars worth of dust—if it was

pure gold. But since its just gold-coated lead, it's not worth one-tenth of that."

MALONE had a trapped feeling.

"I didn't know about that," he said thickly. "Look; I was cheated. It took me more than a month to sell out my stock of goods. Whenever I took in ten ounces or so of dust, I banked it at George Stacey's Gold Exchange—for safekeeping. When I was ready to leave, I turned in my deposit receipts and got back the dust in one poke. I can prove—"

Malone broke off, seeing that none of the four men believed him.

Matt Brule said, "You'd better give Barton and Sloan pure dust for that bogus stuff, Malone, and then leave the Territory for good. If you don't make it up, I'll take you to Portland where there's a law to take care of tinhorns like you."

"I can't make it up," Malone said. "All the gold I've got is in that pouch you took from me and it's sure to be bogus too!"

The merchants began to protest with a noisy outburst.

Assayer Gresham turned back to his acid tray.

Matt Brule stated, "I've got to lock you up, Malone."

Malone didn't say anything. But his mind was made up: he wasn't going to be locked up and he wasn't going to be taken to Portland and turned over to the law.

He turned as though to leave the store ahead of the marshal, then he swung back. He caught Matt Brule in the stomach with a blow that bent the marshal double. He struck out a second time, hitting Brule behind the left ear and knocking him to the floor. He turned and leapt toward the door, ignoring the shouts that rang out behind him. He jerked the door open, plunged out into the rain. It was a hard downpour now, a murky curtain that would hide a man in panicky flight. But Malone, even while running hard, didn't know where to go. Matt Brule would find him wherever he went, in Lewiston. . . .

CHAPTER III

The Wait

A GUNSHOT crashed, a voice started shouting. Matt Brule wasn't a man to stay down, nor one to lose a prisoner. He was sounding an alarm, raising a hue and cry.

Malone saw windows light up, a saloon door jerk open. He darted into the alleyway between the Empire House and a store building, splashed through muddy water. A commotion broke out behind him in the street.

Lewiston was no longer safe for him and to leave it he needed a mount. With the town aroused, Malone didn't see how he was to get a horse—unless it was at gunpoint. And his Colt revolver was in his hotel room.

He reached the rear of the hotel and knew that he had to risk entering it. He tried the kitchen door, found it unlocked.

Luck hadn't deserted him entirely. The Indian woman in the kitchen gave him a blank look but made no outcry. The dining-room was dark, the parlor lamplighted but empty. Frank Beach had been drawn outside by the commotion.

Malone went up the stairs in a hurry, went back the hall, entered his room. He closed the door behind him, crossed to the chair upon which he had heaped his trail clothes. He grabbed up his blanket-lined canvas coat. He turned to the bed, flung aside his blanket roll, took up the gun that lay beneath it. He thought, *Now to get a horse.* . . . He whirled around, for the door hinges had screeched. He swung his gun up, cocking it. Then he saw that it was the girl, Hannah Warden. Behind her, across the hall, the door to another room stood open.

"So you escaped, Malone."

"And now you'll scream and give me away?"

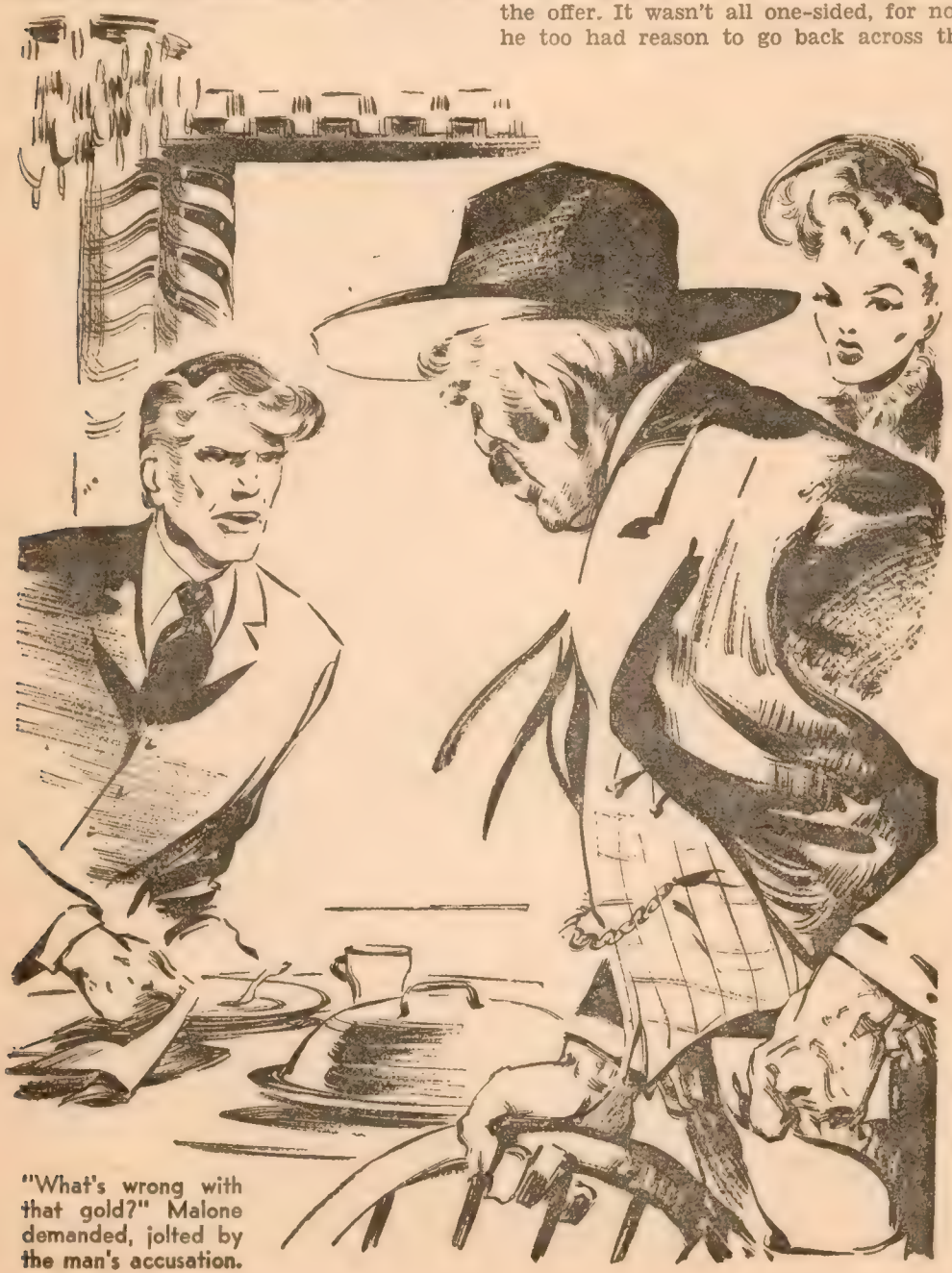
"No, I shan't do that," she told him. "I heard you come running along the hall and knew that I now had a chance to bargain with you." Her eyes were aglow with excitement; her voice was husky with it. "You haven't much chance of getting out of town," she went on. "The street is full of men. I can see them from my window. And if you stay here, they'll find you. There's only one place you can hide, Malone."

Her manner toward him had changed. She had the upper hand and meant to take advantage of it. The gun in Malone's hand meant nothing to her. Malone swore under his breath.

"Where's that one place?" he demanded.

"My room," the girl said.

Malone saw that she was right. The search would reach his room finally and he would be trapped. His only chance was to make use of Hannah Warden. It was that or a long stretch in an Oregon prison. He knew what the bargain would be: in exchange for hiding him, the girl would want him to take her over the mountains—to Belle City, to George Stacey. Malone knew instantly that he was going to accept the offer. It wasn't all one-sided, for now he too had reason to go back across the



"What's wrong with that gold?" Malone demanded, jolted by the man's accusation.

Bitter Roots, Winter or no Winter, and see George Stacey.

"They'll be apt to search every room," he said.

"They can't enter a lady's room," Hannah said, "without her permission. You'll be safe enough. You know what I want of you. Is it a bargain?"

Malone nodded. "I'll take you to Belle City," he said.

He crossed the hall with her, entered her room. She extinguished the lamp as Malone closed the door. He wished there was a lock but none of the Empire's doors were so equipped. He went to the window, against which the rain beat. It was at the side of the building but he could see a portion of the main street by peering out at an angle. Despite the downpour a large number of men were milling about.

It was nearly an hour before someone—perhaps Matt Brule—decided to search the hotel. Malone could hear voices inside the building, boots pounding on the stairs. At least half a dozen men came along the hall and Malone recognized Frank Beach's voice saying, "This is his room, Matt. But he's not here, I tell you."

Malone pressed against the wall so that he would be behind the door if it was opened. The girl sat on the bed. Even in the darkness, Malone could see the way excitement made her rigid. The room was scented with her perfume. Malone was as much aware of her as of the men outside. They had found his room empty and now Matt Brule was opening other doors and peering into other rooms. The marshal said finally, "This room supposed to be empty, Frank?"

"No," the hotelman replied. "Miss Warden has it."

"Well, we'll see," said Brule.

He knocked heavily.

Malone went rigid. He knew that if Brule came in, it would be over. He had no real grudge against the marshal, who was merely doing his duty, and therefore he couldn't use his gun. But the girl gestured at him in warning.

Her voice simulated drowsiness, saying, "Yes? What is it?"

"We want to search your room, Miss," said Brule. "We're hunting that man you saw me arrest. He escaped and—"

"But I'm in bed!" Hannah exclaimed.

Brule hesitated, then asked, "Nobody came in your room?"

"No," she replied. "Of course not!"

"Well, all right," said Brule.

The tenseness went out of Malone. He found that he had been holding his breath. He breathed deeply with relief. Matt Brule and the others were going away. He could hear them descending the stairs. . . .

IT was a strange, and somehow disturbing, experience for Dan Malone. It seemed to embarrass Hannah too. Neither had anticipated how very much alone they would feel once the searchers withdrew. Malone wasn't enough of a hand with women to face the situation casually. And Hannah wasn't so bold or brazen or worldly-wise that she could easily accept having a strange man in her room at night.

Malone said in a cautious whisper, "I'll take a chance on going back to my own room."

"No. That would be foolhardy."

"Brule may not come up here again."

"You can't be sure of it," Hannah said, also whispering. "You'll have to stay here. I—I don't mind." She did mind; she seemed emotionally upset. "Stay until you're sure that they've quit hunting for you," she went on. Then, uneasily: "You'll keep your promise to me?"

"I'll take you to Belle City," he said grimly. "I've got reason to go there now!" He paused, thinking that his reason for making the trip was to cause the downfall of the man she planned to marry. He didn't want to hurt her but only by proving that George Stacey was a dealer in bogus gold could he save himself from prison. "We'll have to get horses," he told her. "And provisions."

"I've money enough. I'll hire horses and buy provisions."

"And Brule will catch on," Malone said, frowning. "We'll have to make him think that somebody else is going with you. Look; in the morning you hunt up Sam Brannon. He's a friend of mine—the only friend I've got in Lewiston right now. You tell him how it is and give him the money for the horses and provisions. I'll get out of here before daylight, then meet you tomorrow night somewhere outside town."

"And you'll really meet me?" Hannah asked, still doubtful of him.

"I'll meet you," Malone said. "I told you

that now I've got reason for going back over the mountains."

He didn't tell her what that reason was, knowing that it would cause her to turn him over to Matt Brule.

The rain drummed drearily against the window.

They settled themselves to wait the night out, Malone sitting on the only chair in the room, and the girl upon the edge of the bed.

CHAPTER IV

The Sorrel Is Missing

IT WORKED OUT the way Malone planned.

He left the hotel by the kitchen door, at four in the morning, and escaped from Lewiston without being seen. The rain let up shortly afterward and Malone made his way to an abandoned cabin about five miles out along the road to Orofino. In mid-afternoon he walked to a nearby farm to ask for a meal. Hunger forced him to make the risk. But luck was with him. The farmer and his wife hadn't heard that he had escaped arrest. They fed him well, seeming pleased to have a visitor.

Shortly after dark Malone watched the road from the cover of some nearby brush. He hadn't long to wait until Sam Brannon and Hannah Warden showed up. The black-bearded Brannon was riding a grulla horse and leading a pinto mare under pack. The girl was mounted side-saddle upon a sorrel.

They reined in when Malone whistled in signal and stepped from the brush.

Brannon said, "Miss Warden was worrying that you wouldn't show up, Dan. I kept telling her that you were a man of your word. We left town about four o'clock. Matt Brule seemed a little suspicious when he saw that I was riding with Miss Warden. I'd have brought another horse, so I could make the trip with you, but that would've made Brule guess what was going on."

"You're sure he didn't follow you from town?"

"I didn't see any signs of him," Brannon replied. "And I kept watching our back-trail."

"He'll know what's up, if you go back to Lewiston," Malone said.

"I thought of that. I'll steer clear of Lewiston and hoof it to Walla Walla," Brannon said.

He dismounted and handed the grulla's reins and the pack mare's halter rope to Malone. "There's camp gear in the pack and provisions for two weeks," he added. "And there's a brand-new Henry rifle in the grulla's saddle boot. I paid for the whole outfit with money Miss Warden gave me. I reckon, Dan, that dust you gave me for wages is like what you gave Barton and Sloan—no good."

"I'm afraid so," Malone told him. "But I'll make it good when I get back from Belle City. I mean to collect pure dust from the tinhorn who passed that bogus stuff off onto me."

They shook hands and Malone mounted the grulla.

He started out, leading the pack mare, and Hannah Warden followed. Sam Brannon turned back along the dark road, afoot.

Malone hit a fairly fast pace, intending to keep on the move until midnight and then camp until daybreak. He didn't want to waste any time. With luck they could reach Belle City in eight days. . . .

Day after day Malone watched the girl's face grow thinner and more weary-looking. Never before had Hannah Warden spent so long a time in the saddle; her riding had been a mere matter of trotting along a bridle path back East. Nor had she slept on the ground before, with no roof over her head. Too, the treacherous trail through the mountains—they had left the road at Orofino on the eastern side of the Bitter Roots—frightened her. For miles at a stretch, it ran along steep slopes where a slip of shod hoofs would have thrown horse and rider over a precipice to certain death hundreds of feet below. She seemed awed too by the jagged rock cliffs that towered everywhere. Malone understood the uneasy look in her eyes. Sometimes the mountains gave him a feeling of smallness.

But Hannah Warden was game.

Malone had to admit that, and admire her spirit. She never complained of her weariness, never voiced her fears. But each day when they halted to make camp at sundown, Malone knew that the trail was wearing her down. He felt guilty about it. But for him, she couldn't have made the trip. And, worse still, she was bound to be hurt at its end. Because of George Stacey.

Even if she did not learn of Stacey's affair with that Belle City honkatonk girl, she would find out that it was he who was behind the bogus gold swindle. More and more Malone told himself, *I shouldn't have let her come.*

THEY hadn't talked much. There had been little opportunity for conversation while on the move, and at night, as soon as they'd eaten, Hannah was forced by weariness to take to her blankets. . . . It wasn't until the seventh night that she ended the silence between them.

It was cold, there in the high country. Malone had taken the axe and cut enough wood to keep the fire going all night. Hannah lay in her blankets with her feet to the fire, as Malone had taught her. He sat on the opposite side of the blaze, smoking his pipe. He thought the girl asleep long ago, and was surprised when she said, "Malone—"

He said, "Yes?" and waited.

"It's been more than two years since I saw George Stacey," she said slowly. "I keep wondering if he's changed."

"A man does change in this country."

"You saw him when you were in Belle City. How—how did he seem?"

"He looked fit," Malone said shortly.

This was his chance to tell her that it was George Stacey who was responsible for the circulation of bogus gold. It was best that she be forewarned so that her discovery that Stacey was crooked would not be too much of a shock. But Malone didn't know how to tell her.

"We became engaged before he left Philadelphia," Hannah said, and it was as though she were merely thinking out loud, rather than talking to Malone. "I was only eighteen then, and George is ten years older. But I was in love with him. He told me that he would send for me as soon as he struck it rich here in the West and we'd be married out here. His luck wasn't as good as he hoped. He wrote regularly but he was never able to send for me—"

She was silent for a lengthy moment, then went on, "He didn't understand that I didn't care that he hadn't gotten rich. When my father died in the Spring, I decided to come out here. I inherited a few thousand dollars and I want to share it with George. I wrote to him about Dad's death but I didn't tell him that I planned to join him. I—I want to surprise him."

"You're running a pretty big risk."

"Yes. I know that now."

"A man can change in a lot of ways in two years."

"You're thinking that he may have changed in his feelings for me?" Hannah asked. She sat up, so that she faced Malone across the fire.

When Malone made no reply, she said, "You don't like him, do you?"

Malone avoided her gaze.

"Why not?" she demanded. "What's your reason for not liking him?"

"The reason will hurt you, Hannah," Malone said, looking at her again. He knew that she had to be told—now. "It took me about a month to sell the goods I packed across the mountains," he said. "Whenever I took in a few ounces of dust, I banked it with Stacey. When I left Belle, I drew out all the gold I'd deposited at his Gold Exchange. I gave him pure gold and got back bogus dust."

"I don't believe it!"

"Your choice," said Malone.

He knocked out his pipe, rose, and spread out his bedroll. He avoided looking at the girl, not wanting to see the hurt in her eyes. She was still sitting there, staring into the fire, when he fell asleep.

The next morning was a bitter cold one with a high wind whipping through the mountain gorges. The sky had a sullen look and threatened snow.

Malone broke camp in a hurry and he and the girl struck out at a faster pace. They didn't speak at all, even while eating breakfast. Heavy blue shadows lay beneath Hannah's eyes, a sign that she had slept little. Malone wished that he hadn't told her about George Stacey.

They stopped briefly at mid-day to rest the horses and eat. There were snow flurries when they started out again. Malone was uneasy. The thing he had feared, being caught on the trail by a blizzard, now seemed a certainty. It grew dark early but Malone kept on for an hour longer and reached a deep-rutted wagon road that ran to some logging camps farther north in the mountains.

Leaving the saddle, he helped Hannah dismount and noticed how, the instant her

feet touched the ground, she shrank away from him.

Later, after caring for the horses and getting a fire started, he said, "This road will take us straight into the mining country. We'll be in Belle City tomorrow night this time, unless a snowstorm comes up."

He saw how the girl peered along the road, a speculative look in her eyes. Malone had the thought that she was reluctant to travel it. He believed that she was afraid of what she would find at its end.

He was wrong about that.

Hannah turned in first, as usual. Malone always took his time about turning in, to cut more wood and smoke his pipe. Because of the girl, he kept the fire burning most of the night, by waking every hour or so to throw on kindling.

It was snowing when he roused himself at midnight.

It seemed the beginning of a real blizzard. The wind was screaming through the trees and everything was a swirling murky whiteness. Malone noticed first that the fire had burned out, then that Hannah was not in her accustomed place. Her blankets had been snatched up by the gale and now were caught on some nearby brush.

Malone looked wildly about. One of the horses, the sorrel, was gone.

Malone muttered an oath.

The girl had saddled up and ridden out, while he slept. He had told her that the road led to the mining camps and she wanted to reach Belle City before him—and warn George Stacey against him. Perhaps it hadn't yet started to snow when she left; perhaps she hadn't realized that the drifting snow could blot out the road so that she might lose her way.

Malone was scared. He knew he had to overtake her soon, else he'd never see her alive again.

CHAPTER V

Wild Shots

MALONE hastily packed the mare with the camp gear, what provisions were left, and the girl's two traveling bags. He saddled the grulla, mounted, and headed into the storm. The wind was drifting the snow, in places, and keeping the road clear of it in others. Malone put the horses into a lope for a couple of miles, then was forced to let them take it easier. He felt somewhat relieved to find that the road, with so many patches bare of snow, was not hard to follow. But he didn't overtake the girl.

He was on the trail for perhaps an hour when he glimpsed a campfire ahead. It marked the camp of some freighters who were hauling logs from back in the hills to Virginia City. One of the teamsters was throwing fuel onto the fire as Malone swung off the road and reined in.

"Did a rider pass here, friend?" Malone asked.

"One did about an hour ago, traveling fast," the teamster said. "Heard him but didn't see him. Something wrong, stranger?"

He got no answer.

Malone was already riding away.

But he knew there was little chance of his overtaking the girl. Hannah was lighter in the saddle; her sorrel was a better mount than his grulla and she was unencumbered by a pack-animal. Her hour's start gave her four or five miles lead, since she was riding hard. But Malone was anxious to reach another camp or wayside place to inquire again if a rider had passed it. That way he could make sure that Hannah hadn't lost her way, strayed from the road, after passing the freighters' bivouac.

He came upon neither a camp nor a roadside building in the next half dozen miles, and then, pushing through a narrow gorge, his grulla horse slipped and went down on some ice-coated rock. Malone leapt clear of the animal but fell sprawling.

He lay stunned, the breath knocked out of him, his left shoulder shot through with pain. When he picked himself up, he saw that the grulla's right foreleg was broken.

Malone swore, angered by the bad luck that kept dogging him.

But he had no choice other than to take the Henry rifle and put the injured animal out of its misery. One carefully placed shot was enough. Malone then debated whether or not he should strip off the grulla's saddle rigging and ride the pinto pack mare. He decided against it. If the blizzard forced him to hole up, he would need the provisions and camp gear. Too, he did not want to abandon Hannah's belongings. He was sure the two traveling bags in the mare's pack contained all of the girl's clothing ex-

cept for the riding habit and coat she now wore. And the sort of clothing she was accustomed to couldn't be bought any nearer than San Francisco.

Malone started out on foot, leading the pack mare.

THE storm battered at him and Malone fought back. In mid-morning he plodded through the drifts into Amity Gulch where there had once been a gold camp. A few shacks and cabins remained but it had been mostly a tent and lean-to camp, and the boomers had taken their canvas homes with them while the wind had leveled the lean-tos. Malone remembered that one of the cabins had been occupied by an old prospector named Macomber, when he came through with his mule train.

He pushed through the blinding snow until he located Macomber's cabin, and felt relieved when he saw smoke puffing from its stony chimney.

Macomber had a mule stabled in a lean-to built against the rear of the cabin and Malone took his pack mare into the shelter. He removed its pack, then went around to the cabin door.

It was barred against the thrust of the wind but Macomber opened when Malone banged upon it. The cabin's warmth hit Malone like a fist and only then did he realize how cold he was.

Macomber, after securing the door, stared at him with astonishment. He was a little man with a shaggy gray beard.

"What're you doing on the trail in this storm, Malone?" he asked.

"I have to get to Belle City in a hurry," Malone said, going to the fireplace and removing his gloves. "Did you see or hear a rider pass here within the past few hours?"

"I heard a rider but that was before daylight," Macomber said. "I'd just woke up. Somebody you're chasing?"

Malone nodded. He didn't know whether or not he should feel relieved. Hannah's passing through Amity Gulch didn't mean that she was still safely on the road. She was pushing her sorrel too hard. The animal wouldn't hold up forever. Malone knew that it was only eighteen miles from Amity Gulch to Belle City but in a blizzard that was a long ride.

Macomber rustled up a meal for Malone and promised to store his gear and put up his spent horse. Later, Malone set out afoot, carrying the Henry rifle in the crook of his arm, his bedroll on his back, and some of Macomber's biscuits and jerked beef in the pockets of his canvas coat. He figured that he could make better time on foot than by riding the tired mare without a saddle and bridle. The snowfall seemed lighter, the wind less savage, and, after an hour, the storm let up.

Even so, Malone found it hard going. The snow was powdery and his boots sank deep into it. He moved at a plodding gait and he had to circle about the deepest drifts.

By late afternoon he had traveled but half a dozen miles and reached a camp called Shamrock. The place boasted a solitary saloon and Malone stopped there to inquire if a rider had passed through that morning. The saloonman, Pete Graves, told him there had been a rider.

"And a woman at that," Graves said. "She was riding a done-in sorrel and wanted to get a fresh mount. I told her there wasn't a horse in Shamrock, only a couple of mules that weren't broke to the saddle. She went on in a big hurry to reach Belle."

"You should have stopped her," Malone told him. "Her luck couldn't have held all the way to Belle."

"I told her she'd better stay here until the storm let up."

"Well, I'll push on," Malone said, and left abruptly, despite Graves' attempt to question him about the girl rider.

He had twelve miles ahead of him, and darkness closed in before he covered a quarter of the distance. He made a half hour's halt among some scrub pines, ate some of the food from his pockets, smoked his pipe.

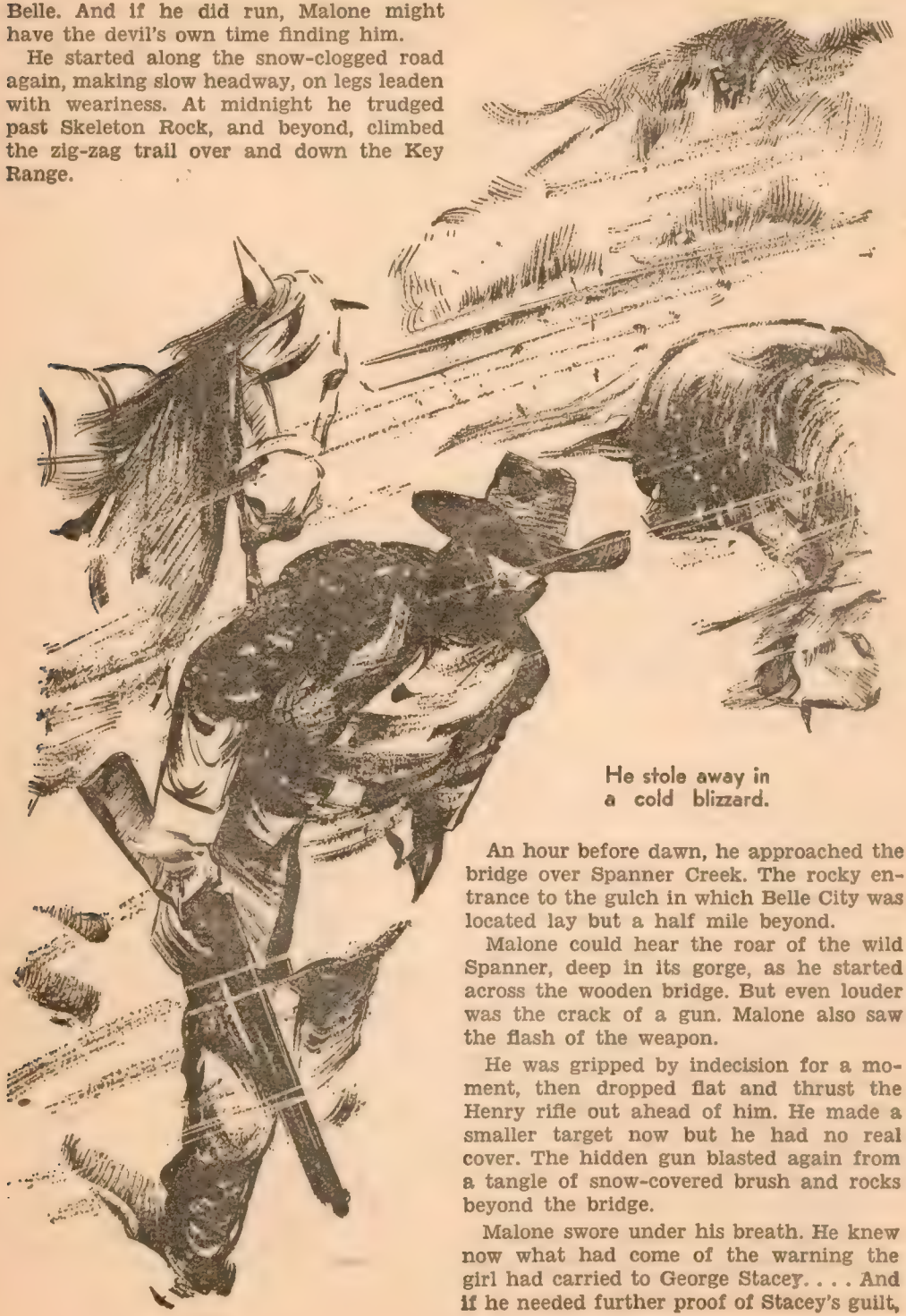
He was less concerned about the girl now. He was convinced that she was one of those persons who took grave risks and won out by their very boldness. He believed that her luck had lasted, that she had reached Belle City. Malone hoped he was right.

Then he remembered why she had left him and gone on alone. He frowned, wondering just how her warning George Stacey would affect himself.

It couldn't change the ugly truth—that Stacey had swindled him with that bogus gold. But the man might try to flee from

Belle. And if he did run, Malone might have the devil's own time finding him.

He started along the snow-clogged road again, making slow headway, on legs leaden with weariness. At midnight he trudged past Skeleton Rock, and beyond, climbed the zig-zag trail over and down the Key Range.



He stole away in a cold blizzard.

An hour before dawn, he approached the bridge over Spanner Creek. The rocky entrance to the gulch in which Belle City was located lay but a half mile beyond.

Malone could hear the roar of the wild Spanner, deep in its gorge, as he started across the wooden bridge. But even louder was the crack of a gun. Malone also saw the flash of the weapon.

He was gripped by indecision for a moment, then dropped flat and thrust the Henry rifle out ahead of him. He made a smaller target now but he had no real cover. The hidden gun blasted again from a tangle of snow-covered brush and rocks beyond the bridge.

Malone swore under his breath. He knew now what had come of the warning the girl had carried to George Stacey. . . . And if he needed further proof of Stacey's guilt,

he had it now. The man meant to cover up his bogus gold swindle—with murder!

The hidden marksman fired again.

Powdery snow was kicked up by the slug, within inches of Malone.

He fired from his prone position, raking the brush and rocks with the Henry's half-ounce slugs. He fired a dozen of the fifteen cartridges in the under-barrel tube before flushing his man. He yelled, "Halt—damn you!"

The shadowy figure retreating through the brush whirled about, fired two wild shots, then started to run again. Malone rose, took aim, shot the man through the left leg. He didn't want George Stacey dead.

But it wasn't Stacey that Malone found lying in the snow, writhing in agony, when he crossed the bridge. It was a young hard-case whom Malone knew from his last visit to Belle City, a man named Jake Payson.

CHAPTER VI

Halter Rope

MALONE had never seen so much fear on one man's face. He listened to Payson beg for his life, then said harshly, "You can save yourself by talking! Who sent you to ambush me?"

"It was the Dutchman!"

"Who?"

"Fritz Baumer. He has the saloon they call the Dutchman's Place." Payson whimpered. "He offered me five-hundred dollars in dust to keep you from reaching Belle. I was waiting here all night and blamed near froze to death. I don't know why he's scared of you but he is—plenty scared. Let me off, Malone . . . Don't kill me!"

Malone was silent, trying to sort out his jolted thoughts. He had been sure that the ambusher was George Stacey, then, finding it was this young tough, he took the view that Stacey had sent him. And this Fritz Baumer didn't fit in. But Malone suddenly recalled what Gresham, the Lewiston assayer, had said about the German who once circulated bogus dust in San Francisco. He saw the pattern then, and George Stacey was still a part of it.

Malone reasoned that the girl had reached Belle, warned Stacey, and the man had gone to this Fritz Baumer. It was possible that Baumer and Brucker were one and the same. And Baumer and Stacey were partners, with the one turning out the bogus gold and the other passing it on to unsuspecting patrons of the Gold Exchange.

"All right," Malone said ."I'm letting you live." He saw relief replace the fear in Jake Payson's eyes. "And I'll send somebody out from town to help you. But if you try ambushing me again—"

"I won't, Malone," Payson broke in. "I swear it!"

Malone left and long afterward reached Belle City, scattered for a mile through the narrow gulch, with its placer claims, each marked by its owner's tent or shack, along both sides of Spanner Creek. Darkness and the heavy blanket of snow hid most of the camp's ugliness. For the most part, the town still slept, but here and there smoke puffed from the tin-pipe chimneys of early risers. The business section was midway through the gulch; it was composed of a couple stores, three eating-places, a hotel, a livery barn, the Gold Exchange bank, and a dozen saloons and honkatonks.

Malone turned in at the hotel, Shannon's House.

A dim light burned in the sparsely furnished parlor. Malone dropped his bedroll in a corner, went to the desk, examined the register. The girl's name was the latest entry. She had made it to Belle, all right.

Big Tim Shannon came from his living quarters, a small room behind the desk. He was in his red flannel undershirt, with his suspenders dangling. He gazed at Malone with sleepy surprise.

"So it's you, Dan," he said. "How is it you're back in Belle so soon?"

Malone liked and trusted the fat hotelman, considering him one of the camp's leading citizens.

"First off, Tim," he said, "there's a hurt man out by the bridge. You'd better send a wagon or a sledge out to bring him in. It's young Jake Payson."

"I'll do that," Shannon said, still looking puzzled.

Malone went on, "I left here a couple of weeks back with ninety-six hundred dollars in dust. When I got to Lewiston, it turned out to be gold-coated lead. Is there bogus dust circulating around here, Tim?"

"I hope not!"

"There probably is and nobody's caught on to it."

"Now who'd pull something like that?" Shannon asked, and it was clear that he was worrying about the dust that he had taken in from the operation of the hotel. "You know who it is, Dan?"

"I've got an idea," said Malone. "How about getting dressed and coming with me? I should have a reliable witness to what I'm doing."

"I'll be with you in a minute," Shannon told him.

THEY went first to the livery barn, where Shannon roused the liveryman and told him to take a rig and fetch Jake Payson in from the Spanner Creek bridge. Then they walked through the gray dawn to Fritz Baumer's saloon.

It was a small place, a grubby plank building. Malone figured that Baumer maintained it merely as a front to justify his being in Belle. The door was locked but it was a rickety one.

Malone slammed against it and it swung open the third time his weight struck it. Shannon followed him inside, and from the darkness at the rear a voice muttered, *"Himmel!* What for you break in my door?"

Baumer was in the doorway of a back room.

"Let's have a light, Baumer," Malone said. "We want to talk."

"Who is?" Baumer asked.

"My name's Malone. Big Tim Shannon's with me."

Baumer gasped. "Malone, so!" He leapt back into the other room, started to shut the door. Malone leapt forward, hitting the door with his left shoulder. It opened wide again and Baumer was reeled backward. Malone grabbed him, pulled him into the barroom, and Shannon lighted a lamp.

Baumer was a red-faced, thick-necked man in his fifties. He wore silver-rimmed glasses and his pale blue eyes behind the thick lenses were frightened. Either he was an early riser or had been waiting up all night, for he was fully dressed.

When Malone let go of him, Baumer shrank back against the bar.

"Jake Payson talked, Baumer," Malone said. "He said you offered him five-hundred dollars to keep me from reaching Belle."

"A lie!" Baumer muttered. "This Jake, he lies about me!"

Malone shifted his Henry rifle to his left hand.

He hit Baumer with his right palm, a hard slap across the face.

"Who put you up to it, Baumer?"

"I know nothing. Ach, it's so!"

Malone swore, hit him again. Baumer began to gasp and tremble. He looked wildly about, then made a sudden dash to the open street door, but Malone thrust out his foot and tripped him. Baumer went down with a crash that shook the rickety building. Malone stood over him, prodded him with the Henry.

"Who put you up to it—George Stacey?"

Baumer's guilty look was giveaway enough.

Malone said, "Get up. We'll go talk with Stacey."

Baumer picked himself up and Malone shoved him toward the door. Shannon followed them outside, and it was broad daylight now.

They angled across the street to the Gold Exchange. It was the only stone building in Belle City. Its heavy door was banded with iron and there were bars across its one window.

Malone kicked at the door, raising a racket, but Stacey didn't come to answer. Some men gathered, asking what was going on. One had a miner's pick and Malone asked him for it. Handing his rifle to Shannon, Malone started battering at the door with the pick. The planks splintered, and finally one split open. Malone broke away enough wood to permit himself to reach inside and lift the bar from its sockets. He shoved the doors wide, entered. The others crowded in after him, and Fritz Baumer was first to guess the truth. He wailed, "The no-good! He's gone without me!" He began to curse in German.

The iron-banded, oakwood strong-box stood open—and empty.

The small back room, Stacey's living quarters, was deserted. The man had taken his spare clothes and all his effects were gone.

The rear door was unbarred and outside the snow was marked with hoof tracks and boot prints. It was clear to Malone that George Stacey hadn't wanted to gamble upon Payson ambushing the man who knew the truth about him. Stacey had stolen

away in the night, taking his loot with him.

THERE was now a crowd of men in and about the Gold Exchange and many of them were lamenting the loss of dust they had entrusted to Stacey. Malone joined them and said, "He left a trail and I'm going after him. Lock Baumer up until he can be taken to Oregon and turned over to the law. He's the one who made the bogus dust and you'll probably find his equipment for cutting up lead and galvanizing it with gold in the back room of his saloon."

He pushed through the growing crowd of angry men, crossed to the hotel and, after another look at the register to ascertain the room Hannah occupied, went upstairs. He knocked on the girl's door, then opened it and stepped inside when she said, "Yes? What is it?"

Hannah was still wearing the gray riding habit, due to her traveling bags being at Macomber's place in Amity Gulch. Malone had caught her before the wall mirror, trying to arrange her hair without the aid of brush or comb.

She faced Malone defiantly.

"So you did it," he said accusingly. "You warned Stacey!"

"I didn't warn him, exactly," she replied: "I simply told him that you were coming to accuse him of working a swindle. I wanted him to know so that he could defend himself."

"Well, he left Belle City during the night."

"Oh, no!"

Her disbelief convinced Malone that she hadn't known Stacey was going to leave. She seemed to wilt and it was evident that her spirit was close to being crushed. But after a moment, she steadied herself.

"I should have known," she said dully. "He denied that he knew anything about the bogus dust, yet he seemed changed from the George Stacey I knew. Why, even his saying he was glad I came was a lie!"

"I could have told you about that, too."

"You knew he didn't want me here?"

"I knew that he'd been friendly with a honkatonk girl."

That hurt her more than learning of Stacey's flight and Malone felt sorry for her. Suddenly he knew that his feelings toward Hannah Warden sprang from his having lost his heart to her. As he pitied her now, so had he feared for her when trying to overtake her in the blizzard. He had been angered by her riding off to reach Stacey before him but he understood now that his anger had been based on jealousy rather than on annoyance that the man would be forewarned. Somewhere along the Bitter Root Mountain passage, Dan Malone had fallen in love.

"What will you do now?" he asked.

"What is there for me," Hannah said, "but to go back East?"

"George Stacey isn't the only man in these parts," said Malone.

"You mean—?"

"I'll tell you what I mean, after I get back from trailing Stacey," Malone told her.

He went to the livery barn and got a saddle mount, and a man yelled his name as he rode out. He looked back and saw the burly Matt Brule by the Gold Exchange where a crowd still loitered. Brule started running after him. Apparently Brule had learned that Sam Brannon hadn't traveled far out of Lewiston with the girl, and guessed that Malone had taken Brannon's place. Matt Brule wouldn't have trailed over the Bitter Roots without being sure that his man was ahead of him.

Malone heard Brule let out a bellow, heard the roar of a shot from the marshall's gun. But Malone was beyond bullet range. He lifted his horse into a lope.

THE trail led north through the gulch, then swung east and finally south. George Stacey was clearing out of Idaho Territory, heading for tah—perhaps to Salt Lake City. Though strictly a townsman by nature, Stacey must have realized that he was leaving an easily followed trail in the snow. Malone made out the marks of five sets of hoofs. Five horses. One or two of them would be under pack but that still left Stacey with two or three partners, men like Jake Payson, no doubt, to gun-guard him in case of pursuit.

Malone pushed his horse, a fairly good dun, hour after hour, but without catching sight of his quarry. At sundown he met up with a group of Mormons driving some beef cattle to the mining camps. They had just made camp and they gave Malone a meal and, after learning of his mission, a fresh mount. They also told him that they

had sighted such an outfit as he described —three riders and two pack animals, they said—in mid-afternoon. It had circled their trail herd at a distance and was traveling fast.

Malone knew then that he had cut down Stacey's lead by many miles. Even if Stacey and his companions didn't make night camp, he should soon overtake them. The Mormon horse, a big blue roan gelding, was eager and fast. And an hour after dark, Malone saw a pinpoint of light ahead. He kept his eye on it, watched it grow. It was a campfire.

Malone reined in, drew the Henry rifle from the saddle boot, let the roan get back its wind, then rode forward at a slow walk.

He halted again when close enough to make out a movement by the fire. He frowned on seeing but one man and one horse. He had been sure he had come upon Stacey's outfit but this appeared to be some drifter cooking up his evening meal.

After a few minutes, when he was sure there were no men beyond the glow of the fire, he rode forward and called out, "Hello, the camp!"

The man by the fire straightened, lay his hand on his holstered gun. He peered at Malone, saying nothing. He was a lanky man with an angular face dark with a stubble of beard. His wariness was understandable. Any man camped alone was apt to take hold of his gun when a stranger approached out of the darkness.

"You see some riders heading south?" Malone asked. "Three of them with two pack horses?"

"Maybe."

"Their trail leads this way but I lost it in the dark."

"You'll find it again, if you swing east a little way," the man said. "They passed by here just before dark."

"Thanks," said Malone, and rode on.

He looked back once and the man was standing by the fire, looking after him.

Malone lifted the Mormon horse into an easy lope. He had ridden another five miles when he approached a tree-fringed creek and saw a movement in the timber. He reined the roan in, slipped from the saddle, held the Henry's stock against his hip. Up ahead a horse nickered. Malone hadn't any doubt then. He'd run Stacey down. The absconding banker and his companions had traveled as far as they could push their horses without a rest. They were afraid of pursuit and so had made a cold camp. Or had set up an ambush.

Malone left his horse ground-hitched, moved warily ahead on foot. He was close to the trees when a gun spat powder-flame at him. He plunged into a tangle of brush, crouched low and waited. Half a dozen more shots racketed and Malone discovered that only two guns were doing the shooting. He had expected that there would be three. Marking the position of one gun by its flashes, Malone took deliberate aim. The guns in the alder thicket let up as he fired three shots in quick succession.

"Stacey!" he called out. "You hear me, Stacey?"

"I hear you, Malone," Stacey replied. "Keep talking."

"This isn't your kind of game," Malone said. "It's not one you can win. Quit fighting and come out with your hands up. It's either prison for you or a bullet through your guts. Take your choice."

"We're three to the one of you, Malone!"

"Sure, but for how long?"

"Long enough to finish with you," said Stacey. "You're a fool if you think I'd give up. I've got what I wanted out of Belle City. I cleaned that camp out, Malone, and I'm holding on to it. Hell, I knew you'd follow me. I figured that, as soon as the girl told me you were on the way to Belle. The only thing that went wrong for me was your finding out so soon that I'd given you bogus dust. I'd counted on your not catching on until it was too late for you to come back over the mountains. But still I'm satisfied. You haven't got me and you won't follow me another step. You're boxed in, Malone. One of my men is coming up behind you—right now!"

Malone looked around, and swore.

The man who had been camped back along the trail loomed out of the darkness. Malone realized how cleverly he had been trapped. Stacey had posted the lank-faced hardcase in an innocent-looking camp so that Malone would be caught from behind at the very moment he reached the alder clump ambush.

Whirling about, Malone fired at the rider. He missed the shot and the hardcase dropped from his mount and took cover.

(*Continued on page* 72)

SIX-GUN TALLY

By FRANK MORRIS

IT WAS late afternoon when Bud Murdoc rode quietly into Clear Fork and put his horse in the livery stable. Few people in town knew who he was, he came in so seldom. He had been in town only once in the seven years since his father, Bill Murdoc, had fled from Clear Fork and died amidst a hail of sheriff lead.

Bud gave instructions that his horse be given a good rubdown and plenty of oats. Then, he walked to the door of the livery stable and looked up and down the empty street.

Everything seemed quiet and peaceful now, but in another few hours it would present a different scene. Ranchers from

ILLUSTRATED BY
FRANK VOLP

Bud Murdoc long planned that justice and retribution would catch up with the man who framed and killed his dad. But what could he do when he discovered that his own mother planned to marry the hombre who shot the older Murdoc in the back?

all over the valley would be coming in for the wedding and the dance and supper. The town would be filled with cowboys and there would be shouting and yelling and drinking. And maybe some shooting. Yes, there was sure to be some shooting.

"Wait up there," the sheriff ordered, and lifted his gun. "What goes on?"

Bud Murdoc nodded his yellow head, his lips twisted into a sour grin and he hitched up his gunbelt. His body and face were lean, his wide mouth tight and hard, and his long level blue eyes gleamed fiercely. He rolled a quirly and lighted it, then stepped out and along the boardwalk, heading for the Two Dice saloon.

His wide shoulders pushed aside the batwings and he stepped inside. He paused a moment to let his eyes become adjusted to the shadowed interior, then ran his gaze along the bar, appraising the four men he saw there.

Three of them were bunched near the middle, one was at the far end, standing alone, a glass of whiskey before him. Old Judge Martin was sitting at a table over against the left wall.

Two of the three men were plainly cowboys; the third one wore the star of a deputy sheriff. He was of medium height, broad, and his Stetson was pushed back from his face, showing a pair of cold gray eyes, small turned-up nose, and a mouth that looked like a gaping wound in his bronzed leathery face.

Bud walked across from the door to the bar and the barkeep set a bottle and glass before him. Bud poured out a drink and saw the deputy turn and look at him, then come slowly down the bar to pause three feet away.

"You're Bud Murdoc, ain't you?" the deputy asked insolently. He looked at Bud through slitted eyes, right thumb hooked in gunbelt.

"That's my name," Bud replied flatly. "You want somethin'?"

"Yeah," the deputy said, a sneer curling one corner of his full-lipped mouth. "You're the son of that yellow-haired widder Hugh Sorden's going to marry tonight."

"I'm the son of Mrs. Mary Murdoc," Bud said. His voice was deceptively soft and a half-smile lifted the corners of his mouth.

"Fine doin's—" The deputy sneered. "When the sheriff marries the widder of a rustler. What you doin' in town? Thinking of sashayin' around to the wedding?"

"Why, certainly," Bud drawled. "It's my mother gettin' married, isn't it? Sure, I'm going to be at the wedding. You got any objections?"

"I'm Sam Duncan, Deputy Sheriff, an' it's part of my job to see there isn't no shenannigans pulled off at the wedding. The sheriff will be plenty busy gettin' hitched. I'm telling you to get outa town inside the next hour, or I'll throw you in the juzgado."

THE deputy was eager for a fight; it lurked in his eyes and hardened the lines of his mouth. It was more than a desire for fighting; it went deeper than that, had more of an object than a mere brawl.

"But I haven't done anything to be arrested for," Bud pointed out, voice still soft. He kept his queer little smile as he spoke, but now it was hard with threat and his eyes burned with a smoldering light.

"Oh, that's easy," Duncan offered. "I'll charge you with bein' drunk and disorderly. That'll hold you over night—till after the weddin', anyway."

Bud threw a swift glance around the room, let his gaze slide back to the two cowboys who had been talking with Duncan; to the lone man at the far end of the bar, to old Judge Martin at the table, to the barkeep who was industriously polishing glasses. They all were listening intently to what was being said.

"I'll be at the weddin'," Bud said flatly and his voice had lost its soft drawl. "And don't you try any monkey business, Duncan. If you do—"

"Why, you young whippersnapper!" Duncan snarled. "I'll break you in two with my bare hands! Just because you're the son of that crazy widder the sheriff has taken a shine to, you needn't think you can get smart with me."

Suddenly he made a grab for Bud's arm. He was ten years older than Bud, outweighed him by thirty pounds, and seemed to think he could handle the youngster with all ease.

Bud jerked back a pace, twisted away from the reaching hands. His right fist lashed out, caught Duncan flush on the point of the chin. The deputy slammed back against the bar, face screwed up in astonishment. That the youngster would dare fight back evidently hadn't occurred to him. For a moment he struggled to keep his feet, then sprang away from the bar with a low growl.

"Damn you! Hit me, will you!"

Again he sprang at Bud with outstretched hands. Bud stood still until the man was almost upon him. Then he squatted on his heels and his arms flashed out and wrapped around Duncan's legs. Bud jerked up, heaved, and Duncan hit the floor on his back.

FOR a moment he lay there, eyes blinking at the ceiling. Then he rolled over on hands and knees, pushed himself up. As he regained his feet, he whirled toward Bud, hand slashing down for the sixgun on his broad hip.

As the deputy's gun cleared leather, Bud's hand dipped, came up, and his gun roared. The deputy's gun hurtled from his grasp and hit the bar, and Duncan stood staring at his numbed fingers.

"Don't any of you rannies make a move," Bud snapped at the two cowboys and the man at the end of the bar.

"It ain't our jamboree." One of the cowboys shrugged.

"Pick up that gun, easy-like," Bud told him, "an' hand it butt-first to the barkeep."

The cowboy stooped, picked up the gun and passed it across the bar. At that moment the batwings at the front slammed back and Hugh Sorden, the sheriff, stepped in, gun in hand.

He stopped just inside the door, confident, poised, a big man with wide shoulders encased in a black coat that reached to his knees. At an angle across his massive thigh was a bullet-studded gunbelt of soft leather. His pearl-gray Stetson sat jauntily on the back of his head, exposing thick brown hair, a florid face with tawny yellow eyes as cold and bright as a cobra's. His mustache was trimmed and waxed to needle points. A handsome man cast in brutish mold.

"What's all that shootin'?" he demanded brusquely.

"Your deputy tried to pull a gun on me," Bud told him flatly, "an' I shot it out of his hand."

"Shootin' at a deputy, huh?" Sorden scowled. "I'll put you in jail for that, mister. Gimme that gun."

"Just a minute, Sheriff," old Judge Mar-

tin spoke up from his table. "I saw the whole thing. Your deputy picked the fight. This young fellow floored him twice. When Duncan got up the last time, he went for his gun. The boy waited till the gun was entirely out of its holster before he made a move. He was just too fast for Duncan."

"That don't make any difference," Sorden snapped. "Gimme that gun!"

"Hold on, Sorden," the Judge said, voice now stern. "You can't arrest this young fellow! It was self-defense."

"Who says I can't arrest him?" Sorden demanded and scowled at the Judge.

"I do," Judge Martin replied calmly. "If you do I'll order his release immediately."

"Ain't you getting kinda uppity, Martin?" Sorden sneered. "Ain't you forgetting yourself?"

"I'm not forgettin'," the Judge said indifferently. "You're the one that's forgettin'. All these other fellows saw it, Sorden. Don't be a plumb fool! You're going to marry this lad's mother tonight and it certainly won't do you any good to put the boy in jail. People just won't like it."

"Oh, so you're the Murdoc brat, huh?" Sorden turned his blazing eyes on Bud.

"You knew all the time who I was," Bud told him. His face had an angry flush and deep in his eyes flamed an implacable hate. "You an' your deputy just want to keep me away from the wedding tonight! Afraid I'll throw a monkey-wrench into your scheme. You figger if you can get me locked up on any kind of charge, that'll hold me long enough for the wedding to be over!"

All his young years of remembering how his father, Bill Murdoc, had been framed and murdered made it necessary to Bud that his father's killer should face his crime, should know that justice and retribution had at last caught up with him. And this man, this Hugh Sorden, was the killer.

"Who'n hell cares a damn about you?" Sorden snarled. The arrogance that lifted the corners of his mouth and slitted his tawny eyes suddenly rode his voice. "There ain't anything you can do about it!"

He rammed his gun back into its holster, took Duncan's arm and turned toward the door.

"Don't be too cocky," Bud snapped back. "Just remember I own half the Lazy M, too! Mother don't own it all."

HUGH SORDEN stopped, let go of Duncan's arm and turned back. He stopped five or six feet from Bud, leaned an elbow on the bar and let a slow smile curl his lips.

"Yeah, that's right; you do, Bud." He nodded. "I'm afraid that isn't goin' to work out so good, either. I can easily see that you don't like me. And as a step-son and half owner of the spread, you'll be a thorn in my side. Tell you what I'll do. I'll buy out your half. I'll give you ten-thousand dollars cash. That's a lot of money for a nineteen-year-old younker. It'd be a good start in life for you—in some other place."

"No," Bud said stubbornly. "You must think I'm a plumb fool, Sorden. Ten-thousand dollars! Why, my half of the Lazy M is worth ten times that much an' you know it."

"All right." Hugh Sorden sighed and let his eyes rove around the room. "You can't say I didn't offer to buy you out."

"An' besides," Bud flung back, "there isn't goin' to be any weddin'! I'm warning you, Sorden—sheriff or no sheriff."

Hugh Sorden didn't seem to hear. He turned and followed Duncan through the front door, out onto the boardwalk.

Bud looked around the room, saw Judge Martin sitting at the table. The two cowboys stood irresolutely at the bar, then poured more drinks into their empty glasses. The Judge beckoned to Bud and he walked over and sat at the table.

"Listen, Bud Murdoc," the Judge said, holding his voice low. "I want to talk with you. Come to my office in about an hour—it's right across the street. But come in the back way—I don't want Hugh Sorden and his bunch to see you. I got something to tell you and it's important. Damned important."

"All right," Bud answered. "I'll get something to eat first. Is my mother in town, has she come in, do you know?"

"Yes, she's at the Golden Hotel, down in the next block."

"After I eat—" Bud nodded. "—I'll drop in an' see her for a few minutes. I want to see Hardrock Wilson, too, over at the Mercantile. Then I'll come to your office."

The Judge nodded, got up and walked out. Bud waited about five minutes, then followed.

CHAPTER II

"Low-down Skunk"

IT WAS still a little early for the evening meal but Bud went into the restaurant and ordered. He hadn't had anything to eat since morning and he was hungry.

He stared with moody eyes at the red and white checks of the table cloth. When the Chinaman placed the food before him, he shrugged, and the hard light in his eyes died down as he cut into the juicy steak.

He couldn't understand his mother. It wasn't like her to marry the man who had shot Bill Murdoc in the back. And he couldn't figure out what had come over her to make her do such a thing.

When he'd first learned of the wedding he'd felt a hot and wild anger. But that kind of anger couldn't last, and soon burned itself down to a fixed and determined purpose.

He'd see her right away, as soon as he finished eating. He'd see Hardrock Wilson first, then he'd go to the hotel and have a talk with his mother. Might be he could find out what was back of this whole thing; maybe he could even persuade her to call it off.

Bud finished his meal, paid the Chinaman and walked out. The sun was completely gone now and a purple haze lay over the distant mountains. Black night was coming in fast. As he glanced around, the lamps were lighted in the Two Dice and horses were beginning to dot the hitchrails along the street.

The Mercantile was in the next block south. Bud crossed the intersecting street and stepped through the big wide doors. A clerk behind the long counter looked at him expectantly.

"Is Hardrock in?" Bud asked.

"Back in his office." The clerk jerked his head toward a door at the far end of the aisle. Bud walked along, spurs jangling, and knocked on the door. At the invitation, "Come in," he pushed the door open, stepped through and heeled it closed.

Seated at the desk near the center of the room, facing the door, was a large man with bushy black hair, gray eyes over a straight nose. His face was a trifle too long to be handsome but he was put together along massive lines, and the fine wrinkles at the corners of his eyes showed that he laughed a lot.

"Bud Murdoc!" the big man boomed. He jumped to his feet and stretched a hand across the desk. "How are you, boy?"

"Okay, Hardrock." Bud grinned, taking the proffered hand.

"Come down for the shindig?" Hardrock asked.

"Uh-huh." Bud grunted and dropped into a chair beside the desk. "I left the Mission at dawn."

"Yeah." Hardrock nodded. "And how is Padre Pedro?"

"Fine as a pig's ear," Bud said, a tight flitting smile twisting his lips. "I'd like to talk with you about this here shindig tonight, Hardrock."

THE big man settled back in his chair, shrugged his wide shoulders. He took a box of cigars from a desk drawer, selected one and shoved the box toward Bud. Bud shook his head and rolled a quirly.

"Well, don't seem to me there's anything you can do about it, Bud," Hardrock said softly. "Take my advice and mosey back to the Mission."

Bud shook his head. He said slowly, "The Padre told me some things, Hardrock. I'm not a button any more—I'm nineteen. I'm old enough and big enough to take a man's place. This is *my* mother gettin' married tonight. I surely have a right to be there, ain't I?"

Hardrock nodded slowly, as if weighing some mooted question.

"Under ordinary circumstances I'd say yes," he agreed. "But this isn't an ordinary set-up, Bud."

"That's the way it seems to me," Bud said flatly. "Anyway, one reason I decided to come down today was that I think I'm old enough now and big enough to take a hand in runnin' the Lazy M. My schooling's over—at least as much as Pedro can give me."

Hardrock looked at him owlishly.

"You certainly are big enough," he conceded, a little grin lifting the corners of his lips. "But this wedding. I know and you know it's just a slick way for Hugh Sorden to get control of the Lazy M. He tried to buy it from your father but Bill Murdoc wouldn't sell, so Sorden framed him for rustling, then shot him in the back.

Then he tried to buy it from your mother and when she wouldn't sell, he wheedled her into marrying him. Added to his Bar S spread, just to the east, the two would make a whale of a ranch."

"I'll be damned if he will, Hardrock," Bud said and bitterness rode his voice. "As my father's son, I own half that ranch. I'm goin' to stop that wedding even if I have to shoot Hugh Sorden in cold blood. I owe him that, anyway, for shootin' my dad."

"I was afraid of that," Hardrock said and pushed a peculiar look at Bud. "Don't be a fool, younker. Hugh'll have a dozen gunmen at the weddin'. Even if you should be so lucky as to get him, they'd make a sieve out of you. There's other ways."

"What d'you mean, other ways?" Bud asked and gave Hardrock a piercing look.

"What you aimin' to do?" Hardrock countered.

"Don't know yet," Bud replied. He shrugged, got to his feet and reached for his hat where he'd placed it on the desk.

He could see he wouldn't get any satisfaction from Hardrock and it puzzled him. Hardrock and his father had been old friends, had come to this country together. It wasn't like Hardrock.

"What *can* you do?" the big man asked. "Nothin' short of shooting is goin' to stop Hugh Sorden. You're not a gunman. He's one of the fastest jaspers with a sixgun in this neck of the woods. That's what's kept him in the sheriff's office all this time."

"I know." Bud nodded. "Sure, I'm no gunman. But I've put in the last three years in pretty heavy practice at drawin' my gun."

HARDROCK bounced out of his chair, stepped around the end of the desk, his movements surprisingly fast for one of his bulk, and placed a hand on Bud's shoulder.

"Look, Bud," he said earnestly, "don't do anything. Keep out of it. Granting that you're fast with a gun, there's still a lot you don't know and which I'm not at liberty to tell you. There'll be happenings tonight that will clear up most of what's wrong. Don't spoil it all by throwing in your rope. Stay away from that weddin'!"

Bud stood, hat in hand, staring at Hardrock Wilson. The man's face was again a mask, eyes cold through slitted lids, jaw clamped.

"Wh-what d'you mean?" Bud blurted.

"I just can't tell you, Bud. It ain't mine to tell," Hardrock replied. His voice was almost pleading. "Just sit tight. Don't do anything. Go on back to the Mission."

Bud stood a moment more, still staring, fumbling with his hat. Then his head jerked up, his jaw stuck out stubbornly, and in his eyes was a blue flame of hate.

"I'm goin' to stop that wedding." He snarled. "My mother just isn't goin' to marry that skunk!"

He turned on his heel, stepped through the door and slammed it closed behind him.

Out on the boardwalk again, he turned toward the Golden Hotel. He went into the lobby and across to the clerk.

"I want to see Mrs. Mary Murdoc," he told the baldheaded oldster behind the counter. "She's my mother. She got a room here?"

"Yeah." The little man nodded and looked Bud over through squinting eyes. "Upstairs, second door on your right."

Bud mounted the stairs slowly, trying to think out what he'd say. It had been six months since his mother had last visited him at the Mission and many things had happened in that time. She'd probably just smile at him, shake her head tolerantly. To her, he was still her baby boy; she didn't seem to realize he was a grown man now.

Bud paused at the halfway landing of the stairs. Perhaps he'd better not talk with her. She'd only ridicule him, pay no attention to him, advise him to leave town and not horn in on her affairs. He shook his head stubbornly. No, he'd talk to her. At least he could tell her what he thought, how he felt.

He went on up the stairs, down the corridor to the second door on the right and rapped with his knuckles. He heard the sound of light footsteps. The door opened and his mother stood there, looking at him with startled eyes.

"Bud!" she exclaimed, her voice almost a whisper. "Bud, what are you doing here?" She opened the door wider and stood aside for him to enter.

"Hello, Mother," Bud said and followed her into the room. "You seem surprised to see me."

"Well, yes, I am, Bud," she replied, not looking at him. "I—I thought you were up at the Mission with Padre Pedro."

BUD dropped to a chair and searched his mother's face but she wouldn't meet his eyes. She walked over to the dresser, began fussing with her hair, catching little tendrils and tucking them back in place. He could see her fingers tremble.

"I came down for the weddin', Mother," he told her. "I didn't get any invitation but—"

She whirled around to face him, cheeks suddenly pale. She sucked in a breath, a little gasp, and her eyes were big and round.

"Bud, please," she said, reaching out a hand to him.

"What is it, Mother?" he asked, jumping to his feet and taking her hand. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, Bud, please go back to the Mission. Go *now*," she whispered. She was staring into his eyes and by the yellow light of the kerosene lamp he could see she was frightened.

"What are you afraid of, Mother?" he asked softly. "Why don't you want me at your weddin'?"

She didn't answer. He pulled her close against him and her head rested on his shoulder. She was sobbing softly and he could feel her body trembling.

"Oh, my boy!" she whispered. "Please go. That's all I can tell you. Just go."

"I—I don't understand," Bud said, voice flat and lifeless. "You evidently don't want me at your weddin'. Don't you want to marry this man Sorden?"

"I—Oh, yes, Bud. Yes." She pushed herself away from him, dried her eyes on a flimsy handkerchief. "It—it's just the nervous strain, I guess. There, be a good boy." Her eyes still were filled with fear.

"Um-m." Bud grunted. Something was wrong, decidedly wrong. She didn't seem at all happy about getting married. "Well, if that's the way you feel about it, reckon there's nothin' else for me to do." He turned toward the door.

She watched him and her expression smoothed out. Her glance held him and a mutual affection was there, and a deep longing.

"Kiss me, Bud," she said and lifted her face. "Wish me well?" She tried to smile but Bud could see it was only a fear-twisted grimace.

"Wish you well?" he repeated, stooping to implant a kiss on her colorless cheek. "Of course I wish you well, Mother. Always. But the man you're marryin' is a low-down skunk."

Her eyes searched his face as he paused at the door and looked back. She said, "Please, Bud, go back to the Mission."

Bud turned and walked out without reply. His chin jutted out and his jaw clamped hard. Now, more than ever, he was determined there would be no wedding. His mother was being forced into it. She was afraid of something.

CHAPTER III

"Response To The Sheriff"

ALMOST AT the foot of the stairs, Bud remembered Judge Martin's request to come to his office. The back way. When he reached the lobby, Bud paused and looked around. The baldheaded clerk was talking to a small red-faced man dressed in a business suit of loud checks, a black derby on his head, and neither paid any attention to who was coming down the stairs.

Bud turned and walked along the hallway to the kitchen and out the back door.

Back here it was black night, relieved only by a few straggling bars of yellow light from rear windows. He looked around him, searching the night for its menace, then moved slowly into the darkness beyond the hotel.

The judge's office was in the next block, across from the Two Dice saloon. Bud crossed the intersecting street, continued up the alley. At the door of the building this side of the restaurant, he paused. He put out a hand, turned the knob, and the door gave under his touch. He stepped inside and heeled the door closed.

He found himself in a small bedroom, surprisingly neat, with a door opposite the one by which he had entered, and through which came a shaft of yellow light. He stepped over and peered through the door and saw Judge Martin sitting at a desk, looking at some papers.

"Come on in," the judge said without lifting his eyes.

Bud walked in and closed the door, stood

Bud squatted on his heels and his arms flashed out and wrapped around the man's legs, as the man made ready to attack.

at the end of the desk. There was a front window with a sign painted on it, and as he turned to face the judge, the window was at his left. The lower half of it was raised as high as it would go, to let in the air.

Over against the wall at Bud's back was a bookcase filled with leather-bound law books. A revolving bookstand at the other end of the desk was within the judge's easy reach, filled with more books. Behind the Judge's highbacked chair was a small fire-

place, over the mantle a pair of polished cowhorns mounted in red plush.

"You wanted to talk with me?" Bud asked, searching the judge's face as the older man looked up.

The judge was an aged man, past seventy. His once brown hair was now a silvery gray combed back in a pompadour from a broad and sloping forehead. His nose curved in a humped beak and his chin was inclined to recede, giving him the aspect of a great predatory bird. His pale blue eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot and large purple veins made zig-zag lines from both temples.

"Yes," the judge answered, voice low. "Sit down, won't you?"

Bud dropped into a chair at the end of the desk. "What did you want to talk with me about?" he asked.

"About Hugh Sorden and the evil things he has done," the judge answered, laying aside the paper he'd held in his hand. "And about me. The doctor tells me I haven't very much longer to live. Maybe a month, maybe a year. Maybe an hour. He said—"

"Why—why, that—that's too bad," Bud stuttered, taken aback by the old man's indifference. The judge waved a hand, calm and unruffled.

"What does it matter?" he asked. "I've lived a full life. Too damn much bad whiskey, though. But before I cash in my chips, I want to straighten out a few things. When I saw you there in the saloon, the way you handled Sam Duncan, I got the idea that a young fellow like you would be the one for me to trust. You'll probably live a long time and maybe can help straighten out some of the wrongs I've done. Then, too, you're vitally interested personally."

"How do you mean?" Bud asked. "What ——"

"You and your father. And your mother." The judge paused to moisten dry lips. "Hugh Sorden, the sheriff, is a bad man, Bud, a mean man, vindictive, unscrupulous, ruthless. He stops at nothing, not even murder. He's had me under his thumb for years—no matter now why or how—and when he pulls the strings, I have to jump. I'm tired of it. I'm through jump—"

The throaty roar of a sixgun just outside the open window shattered the quiet peacefulness of the town, choked off the judge's words. The old man's body jerked and he slumped sideways in his chair, head lolling on one shoulder. A bright red spot began to spread on his left chest.

BUD MURDOC sat transfixed, eyes bulging at the damp red splotch on the old man's shirt. How long he sat there staring, he didn't know. Suddenly he jerked to his feet, flung a swift glance through the open window. He saw Sheriff Hugh Sorden coming across the street at a run, Sam Duncan at his heels. This would be the kind of a jam the sheriff would be delighted to catch Bud in. He'd arrest him for murder, railroad him, maybe hang him.

All this flashed through his mind as he stood staring at the on-coming sheriff. Bud's legs seemed paralyzed, incapable of movement. He'd have to get out of here and fast. Through the open window came the sounds of yelling men, the hurried scuffle of running boots. Bud whirled toward the rear door, took two quick steps, when the front door slammed open and the sheriff strode in, naked gun in hand.

"Wait up, there," the sheriff ordered and lifted his gun. "What goes on here?"

"Somebody shot Judge Martin," Bud told him flatly.

"Yeah?" Sorden's voice was suddenly filled with unholy glee and his tawny eyes gleamed with eagerness. "Get your hands up, feller," he rasped.

Men came crowding in behind the sheriff, a bellow of voices rose and boot-heels thumped and drummed on the boardwalk outside. Bud looked at the black muzzle of the gun in Sorden's steady hand and knew he hadn't a chance to get his own gun out of leather before that yawning pit would belch hot lead.

His hands went up shoulder high, thin lips twitching in a crooked grimace. This was what Hugh Sorden had wanted. Here was something that could be pinned on Bud Murdoc; something that would end with a hempen rope made into a hangman's noose. Bud turned cold at the thought and his stomach seemed to come up and choke him. Maybe that was why the judge had been shot through the window. Not because of what the judge had been telling him but to pin the murder on him, Bud Murdoc. Bud's eyes narrowed to slits.

"Take his gun, Sam," Sorden ordered.

THE deputy, a sneer on his thick lips, stepped forward and lifted the gun from the holster at Bud's hip. He grabbed Bud's arm roughly, swung him around and prodded the gun into Bud's spine.

"Hah!" He chortled. "The fightin' rooster's done got his spurs clipped, by damn! Caught you for fair this time, my buckaroo."

Bud didn't answer. The sheriff slid his gun back into its holster, stepped around behind Bud, to the desk. He stared at the judge a moment, leaned forward with his hands on the desk. Then he straightened up and looked around.

"He's dead, all right," he said. "An' this ranny here is the jasper who shot him."

"That's not true!" Bud burst out.

A man in the crowd spoke up. "Take a look at his gun, Sheriff, see if it's been fired."

Duncan took his own gun from its holster, pushed it against Bud's back, then handed Bud's gun to the sheriff. Sorden took it, sniffed at the muzzle, then opened the breech and ejected the cartridges into his hand. Five cartridges and one empty shell.

"It's been fired, all right." Sorden smirked. "And recently."

"Sure it has," Bud said, voice tight. "That's when I shot the gun outa Duncan's hand, when he drew on me over in the saloon. Remember?"

"Yeah, that's right," the man in the crowd spoke up. "The barkeep told us about that."

"This ain't the gun he did it with," Sorden said. The sheriff's hands shuffled the papers on the judge's desk, moved them aside and uncovered a .45 Colt. He picked it up, smelled the muzzle, ejected the cartridges. One of them was an empty shell. "Here's the gun that done it," the sheriff said. "The judge's own gun."

Men shuffled their boots and stared. Bud gulped and beads of sweat broke out on his face. That gun hadn't been there before the sheriff came in. And Sam Duncan had been around on that side of the desk. No doubt it was the gun used to shoot the judge but it had been hidden there during the excitement.

"I didn't shoot him." Bud snarled, enraged at the futility of his denial. "I was just sittin' there in that chair, talking to him, when the shot come through the window!"

"A likely story." The sheriff sneered. "What was you talking to him about?"

"You don't have to tell him, feller," a man spoke up.

"Shut up!" Sorden snarled. "Just because you're a jack-leg lawyer don't give you no right to horn in, Abe Sellers!"

"Every man has a right to be advised by a lawyer, Sorden, and you know it," Sellers said pompously.

"It was a personal matter," Bud replied.

"Personal or not, what was it?" Sorden demanded.

Bud stared at the lawman with cold eyes. True, Judge Martin hadn't told him anything except that he didn't expect to live long. But there was no reason he should tell the sheriff that. Let Sorden think what he pleased and worry over what it might be.

"I've nothin' more to say," Bud said and shut up like a clam.

His face was a mask with two blazing eyes. More than that he showed the sheriff nothing. He was angry and he was scared and his stomach was a hard knot. His response to the sheriff's further questions was only a cold-eyed stare. The crowd began to shuffle their boots and a low mumble arose.

"All right, then, we'll take you to jail," the sheriff snapped. "The charge is murder, feller!"

CHAPTER V

"King of the Valley"

IT WAS ten o'clock and Bud Murdoc was locked in his cell, alone with bitter thoughts. He'd played hell, stopping the wedding. He could tell by the whooping and yelling that it had taken place two hours or more ago.

The door from the office into the cell corridor swung open, letting a bar of yellow light slant along the floor. Bud rose from the edge of the bunk where he'd been sitting, walked to the bars of the cell door and peered through. Of the three cells his was the only one that was occupied.

A stocky man entered the corridor, turned and locked the heavy door behind him. Then his boot-heels came pounding along the floor.

He paused in front of the cell, raised the lighted lantern he carried, and looked in. Bud stared into the swarthy face of Sam Duncan, the deputy sheriff.

Bud's face showed a wry distaste and his lips flattened into a thin white line. The sight of the deputy's ugly face and leering lips gave him a feeling of disgust, as if he'd felt the cold slimy body of a snake.

"Well, smart alec." Duncan smirked. "I told you to get outa town. But no, you wouldn't listen. I told you I'd slap you in jail if you didn't. And here you are."

"Yeah, but you had to frame me to get me here," Bud rasped. "I didn't shoot the judge and you know it!"

"Tell that to the jury." Duncan chuckled. "I say you did shoot him an' with his own gun, too. We have the gun an' empty shell."

Bud didn't say what he wanted to say. He didn't mention the fact that if the judge had been shot at such close range as across the desk, there would have to be powder burns on the dead man's face and clothing. That fact alone should prove his contention that the shot that killed Judge Martin had come through the open window.

But he wasn't telling that to Sam Duncan. He was being framed, and to give that bit of evidence into the sheriff's hands would enable Hugh Sorden to fake up evidence to meet it. Sorden could easily get one of his men to swear that he saw Bud outside the window when the shot was fired; that he saw Bud fire the shot, then jump in the door and go into the office.

"But you haven't hung me yet," Bud flung back.

"Hah! Not yet." Duncan's grin was wolfish. "But it wouldn't take long if I had my way about it. Sheriff Sorden, though, seems to have other ideas.He's gettin' soft-hearted I'm afraid—this is his wedding night, you know." Duncan chuckled and went on: "The weddin's over, feller, and you didn't stop it. Your maw's married Hugh Sorden."

"She sure married herself a skunk," Bud told him flatly.

DUNCAN grinned again. "That ain't the way to talk about your new step-pappy, feller. The happy bride'n groom've gone out to the Bar S. That's where the sheriff lives when he's at home, if you didn't know it. Not that you'll ever get to visit them. He's takin' just a few close friends out there for a little quiet celebration. But as I was saying, the sheriff's gettin' soft; he doesn't want to have to hang his new stepson. So he sent me to make you a proposition."

"I know," Bud snapped. "He don't want to have to hang me for a murder he knows I didn't commit! Hanging his new stepson might kick back, too. It wouldn't look so good to a lot of fellers."

"Why not?" Duncan asked. He spoke in the same half-amused voice, yet the tone of it flattened, it lost some of its arrogance, and his eyelids narrowed into a squinting frame around his eyes.

"Because, you see, I own half the Lazy M," Bud said. "My mother inherited only half of it; I inherited the other half. Folks'il say Sorden hung his stepson so's he could get the whole ranch!"

"I ain't got anything to do with that." Duncan shrugged. He turned and walked back to the corridor door, made sure it was locked, then came back to Bud's cell.

"Here's what Hugh told me to tell you," he continued. "He says he'll have a horse tied back of the jail. I'm to unlock the cell door an' the back door. Along about midnight you slip out, hit your saddle and hightail it outa here. Get clear outa the country. Go down to Mexico or some place. An' stay there. There'll be five-hundred dollars in the saddlebags an' enough grub to last you a couple of days."

"So the sheriff's gettin' scared!" Bud taunted. His laugh was short and harsh, with an utter lack of mirth. Then he looked hard at Duncan.

Did Hugh Sorden mean it? If a man had his pride and a will to back it up, if he knew he was innocent, and if these were the things he would nourish and never let go, it made but little difference if he ran away, or how far. It was the will to return and settle the score that counted.

"Scared?" Duncan asked, a touch of wonder in his voice.

"He knows he can't prove that murder charge," Bud said, "an' he's afraid to have me hanging around this part of the country. Why don't he just come in and shoot me in the back, like he done my dad? He could drag my body out the back door and say I was tryin' to escape. He could tell it scary enough."

Peering through the flickering light, Bud saw a peculiar expression flit over Duncan's ugly face. The sight of that startled look only confirmed Bud's heretofore vague idea, and made him gasp.

He'd hit the nail on the head. That was exactly what the sheriff was planning to do.

HE saw the whole scheme now.

Duncan had been sent to make the proposition of escape, make it look easy, plausible. Sure, he would leave the cell door unlocked, and the back door, too. But Duncan or some other gunman would be lurking in the shadows out there and when Bud came through the door they'd shoot him down. It would be plain murder. And the fact that his body would be found outside the jail door would prove their claim that he was trying to escape.

Bud's hands clenched tight on the bars of the cell door, so tight that his knuckles showed white. His face was pale and drawn and his eyes blazed now with a potent hate. But he wouldn't fall into such a trap as that.

No, he'd rather take his chance on standing trial for the murder of old Judge Martin. At least, in that, he'd have a slim fighting chance. With Judge Martin dead, they'd have to try him before a judge that wasn't under Sorden's thumb. But with Sorden's proposition, he'd have no chance at all. His death was as certain as it would be if he went through that back door.

Sam Duncan stood staring at him, lips twitching with the eagerness he was trying to hide. His eyes glowed in the semi-darkness like those of a cat.

"What d'you say, feller?" he asked at last when Bud made no response to his offer. "Will you leave the country if we let you escape?"

"You can tell Hugh Sorden to go to hell!" Bud answered. His voice was deceptively soft. "I'll take my chance on bein' tried for murder."

He wanted to add more to that, to tell this smirking-faced devil that he understood the plot, that he knew he wouldn't stand a chance of living till sunrise if he accepted the sheriff's offer. But discretion held his tongue. Better not let them know he was aware of their bloody scheme.

"You're plumb loco, feller." The deputy sneered. "Here the sheriff's offerin' you liberty, a chance to live, and you'd rather stay an' be hanged."

"It's my neck that'll be stretched, ain't it?" Bud snapped, and turned back to his bunk. Duncan shrugged and looked back down the corridor to the office door.

"Sure, it's your neck, all right," he said, "an' it'll get stretched as sure as you stay here. But if you change your mind, just call Shorty there in the office. Think it over—but not too long. We'll have to have time to get your horse saddled and tied around back. You gotta be well on your way before dawn."

Bud didn't answer. Duncan turned and walked back to the corridor door, unlocked it, passed into the office and closed the door behind him.

Bud cursed softly under his breath. His mother had married that skunk and there wasn't a thing he could do about it. He would be tried for the murder of Judge Martin, probably found guilty and hanged. Every last obstacle would be swept from Hugh Sorden's path; he would be king of the valley.

Bud sat on the side of his bunk, head in hands, trying to think it out.

Maybe the sheriff had meant what he said, what Duncan had told him. Maybe there was no trap; maybe he was passing up his only chance to come out of this alive.

No. that couldn't be, either. Sorden just wasn't that kind of a man. Besides, he, Bud Murdoc, owned half the Lazy M. If he died, his mother would inherit that half—she would have the whole ranch. And Sorden would have control of it all. Sorden wanted Bud out of the way. Not over the border, alive, where he could come back. But dead.

As long as Bud Murdoc was alive, Sorden's scheme wouldn't work out.

Again Bud cursed. A man had to die some time. But it made hot anger seethe in his veins to know the futility of his predicament. He certainly had no desire to die. Especially without a chance to fight back, without righting the wrong he'd pledged himself to avenge. He didn't want to die with the stink of Hugh Sorden's crimes strong in his nostrils.

CHAPTER V

"Whale of a Ranch"

TIME DRAGGED on and gradually the sounds of festivities died down and the town quieted. Bud got up and paced the floor, back and forth, back and forth. He felt as restless as a tiger in a cage. When he became tired of his pacing, he again sat on the edge of the bunk, buried in thought.

He had to get out of here—alive. But how? He couldn't accept Hugh Sorden's proposition. That meant death, sure and certain. Again he got to his feet, stepped to the cell door and examined the lock and bars. No way out there unless the door were unlocked.

Unless the door were unlocked!

He again examined the bars and the lock of the door. He put his hand through the bars and found he could easily reach the outside of the lock. If he had a key, he could unlock it.

He stood there long minutes, staring out into the dark corridor. It might work. He'd be no worse off if it failed.

He turned and searched his cell. There wasn't a thing in it except the bunk and that was fastened to the wall and floor. He sat down again on the side of the bunk.

For fully ten minutes he sat there, turning the idea over in his mind, thinking out each step, each move. Then, reaching a decision, he raised his voice in a wild startled yell.

"Hey, guard!" he shouted, and the booming echoes ran through the corridor. "Guard, come here quick!"

From the front office came the muffled sound of a chair scraping the floor. The door at the end of the corridor opened, letting yellow light knife along the row of cells. Boot-heels pounded the board floor.

"What'n hell's the matter back here?" the guard demanded. He was an old man, stooped, with a round head on a short neck. A matted beard covered his face, all but the piggish eyes and the crooked nose.

"There's a snake in my bunk!" Bud told him.

"A snake?" The Guard snarled. "Thought mebbe you'd changed your mind about Sorden's offer! Go on back to sleep and quit botherin' me. You're drunk!"

"There's a snake in here, I tell you," Bud urged. "Gimme something to kill it with! When I laid down. I could feel the slimy thing wigglin' under me."

"Well, hell, reckon I'd better get you a stick or somethin'." The guard snarled. "If I don't, you'll keep me awake the rest of the night with your hollering! I'll get the stove poker."

The old man turned and shuffled back to the office door, to reappear almost immediately with the poker in one hand, the lantern in the other. He sat the lantern down, closed the corridor door and locked it, then came on down to the cell and handed Bud the poker through the bars. Bud took it in his right hand.

"It's not very heavy," he said and lifted it up before his face to look at it better in the uncertain light. It was still between the bars and the guard raised his bleary eyes and looked at it, too.

"Heavy enough for a snake," the oldster said.

"Or a man," Bud said and brought the poker down in a smashing blow on the old man's bare head.

THE guard grunted, turned a little sideways, but didn't go down. His eyes were dazed and his hand pawed feebly for the gun at his hip. Bud reached his left hand through the bars, caught the guard's shirt collar and yanked him closer. He brought the poker down again on his head. The old man sagged at the knees but Bud held him up close to the cell door, reached through and got the bunch of keys at his belt. Then he let the old man slide to the corridor floor.

Bud knew which key fitted the cell lock, the biggest one on the ring. It took only a moment to put the key in the lock and turn it, and the cell door swung open. Then he was out in the corridor, bending over the unconscious man.

"Sorry, old timer," he muttered. He unbuckled the guard's belt, with its holstered gun, and fastened it around his own waist. The belt was studded with brass shells and Bud examined the gun to see that it was fully loaded.

He took the old man by the shoulders and dragged him into the cell, closed the

Bud held him up close to the cell and got the keys off the belt.

door and locked it. Then he walked to the office door, unlocked it, went through and locked it behind him. He tossed the keys on the desk, picked up the Winchester he saw leaning in a corner, and found a box of shells for it in the desk.

Then he stepped out on the boardwalk. He had to have a horse. He looked up

the street and saw a half dozen or more at the hitchrail in front of the Two Dice saloon. Rifle tucked in the crook of his arm, he walked calmly up the street, untied the reins of a big black and stepped up into the saddle. He reined around and rode down the street.

He rode until he got to the Bar S, Sorden's ranch, located about two miles south of Clear Fork, and it was into the road that led south that Bud turned the big black horse. Padre Pedro and the Mission school were to the north, forty miles back into the mountains on the trail that led to Phoenix.

There was only one thing to do now. Of course he could ride over the border, way down yonder, and disappear. But if he stayed here in the valley, he'd have to get at Hugh Sorden some way and force the man to go for his gun. It was certain that the two of them could not control the Lazy M, and Bud simply could not stomach the thought of his mother living with Hugh Sorden as the man's wife.

The Sorden headquarters house was dark when Bud came in sight of it, except for one window at the front that showed a square of yellow light. The bunkhouse and other buildings crouched in the blackness like lurking beasts.

In the shadows of the little grove of cottonwoods in the midst of which the headquarters house had been built, Bud sat his horse and looked over the lay-out.

If he rode boldly up to the house, he most likely would be shot out of the saddle. From the way things looked, the festivities were over and the guests had departed. It must be long after midnight, the cowhands had hit the hay, and probably no one was still up but Hugh Sorden and his bride.

Bud grated his teeth and stepped down from the saddle. He flung the reins over a low limb, pulled the Winchester from its scabbard and started on foot to follow the shadows of the trees around to the rear of the house. He wanted to get into that front room where the light was. There he would find Hugh Sorden.

At the rear of the grounds he found a natural gulley, rather shallow, that led from the grove past the back of the barn. From the barn to the windmill was an open space of nearly a hundred yards that he would have to traverse. But as yet there was no moon, only the dim, wan light of the stars peeping here and there from behind fleecy clouds.

FINALLY he came to the back of the barn and no outcry had been raised, no sixgun had roared its throaty challenge. Here he stooped as low as he could, taking advantage of every shadow, and sneaked across the open space to the windmill.

From there it was only about fifty feet to the back door of the house and he went across this like a flitting shadow. He paused only long enough to lean the Winchester against the wall by the door and take off his boots; then the kitchen door opened under his touch and he stepped inside. The opposite door opened into a long hallway at the far end of which he could see a dim crack of light seeping under a door. Inch by inch he slipped down the hallway, his bootless feet making no sound.

At the closed door he stopped. He couldn't just yank it open and shoot Hugh Sorden in cold blood. He would have to give the skunk a chance to go for his gun. Sorden was probably a fast man with a sixgun, like Hardrock said. Bud felt he could match it; it was the speed of his hand he would have to rely upon once that door was opened.

He could hear the low mumble of voices but couldn't distinguish the words. He reached out his left hand, slowly turned the knob, then as slowly pulled the door open, standing behind it as it came toward him. He had to have a moment for his eyes to become accustomed to the increased light that now was pouring in a widening yellow shaft down the hallway.

"What the devil!" he heard Sorden exclaim. "Did somebody open that door, or did it blow open?"

"I didn't feel any breeze," Bud's mother's voice answered, "and I didn't hear anything."

"Well, I'll see," Sorden said.

"Stand where you are, Sorden!" Bud said and stepped into the open doorway.

"You!" Sorden jerked out, eyes widened in astonishment. He was in the middle of the room, walking toward the hall door. Bud saw his mother sitting in a big chair by the fireplace, staring at him, eyes big and round and bright.

"Yes, me," Bud replied, voice grim. "You

thought I was dead by this time, didn't you? Well, your little trap failed."

"Trap?" Sorden asked. "What're you talkin' about?"

"Yeah, trap. You know what I mean. You had Sam Duncan come to my cell and offer to leave it unlocked, and the back door unlocked. Told me there'd be a horse out back with money an' grub in the saddlebags, and for me to hightail it over the border. But I knew better. I knew when I stepped out that back door I'd take a hail of bushwhack lead from Duncan an' your other men hidden in the dark. I'd be killed while trying to escape. You know I own half the Lazy M an' that was your way to get rid of me. It just didn't work, Sorden."

"You're crazy!" Sorden snapped. "I never—"

"But I got out," Bud interrupted. "Out the front door where there wasn't no drygulchers waiting. I got a horse an' I got a gun. And here I am." He stood on spread legs, thumbs hooked in gunbelt. "Fill your hand, Sorden," he added.

SORDEN let a grin spread over his mouth, and held up his right hand. It was swathed in bandages.

"You wouldn't shoot a helpless man, would you?" he asked. "I cut my hand when I was slicin' the wedding cake." His grin broadened. "The way it's bandaged up now, I'm helpless to use a gun. I'm the same as unarmed."

"Hell!" Disgust and contempt rode Bud's harsh voice. "Might know a snake like you would crawl out of it!" He turned his eyes on his mother. "Get your things, Mother; I'm takin' you out of here. When your hand gets well, Sorden, I'll come for you. I'll get my horse, Mother."

He turned to go out the door, heard his mother scream. As the scream started, Bud jumped sideways, dropped to the floor rolling. Even then, Sorden's left-handed shot almost caught him. He felt it burn along the side of his neck.

He came out of the roll, up on one knee, and his sixgun was in his hand. Through the smoke he saw Sorden's hand jerk up his gun for another shot, heard the triple click as the hammer eared back. Bud's gun bucked in his hand and Sorden's second shot smashed into the ceiling. A round black hole suddenly appeared between the sheriff's tawny eyes. He slammed back against a chair, turned partly around. Then his knees buckled and he sprawled face down on the floor.

Bud heard his mother sigh, saw her lean back in her chair and close her eyes. She had fainted. He whirled to the door, sped down the hallway, through the kitchen and out the back. He'd have to get his boots on and make it to his horse by the time the men in the bunkhouse could get out.

He yanked on one boot, grabbed up the other, when the bunkhouse door flung open and men came spewing out. In his haste Bud missed the boot, tried again. By the time he got it on, the men had started across the open space toward the windmill. Bud grabbed the Winchester, levered in a shell and threw a shot at their dark forms dimly bulking in the eerie light. They paused only a split second, then came on at a run. Bud made a leap for the watering trough by the windmill.

He was still feet away from it when he felt a blast of pain in his right leg and it crumpled under him. He sprawled and rolled, came up to a sitting position behind the trough. Another slug burned along his ribs and he grunted with the sudden searing pain of it.

BUT now he was where he could pay back some of the shots thrown at him. He shoved the rifle forward and squeezed the trigger. One of the men running across the yard stumbled, pitched forward and lay still. The other four came on, filling the night with the roar of their blazing guns.

Suddenly from far over to the right Bud heard a yell and another gun joined in the chorus.

"Hold 'em, Bud! I'm coming!"

Bud knew that booming voice, the voice of Hardrock Wilson. Now the men from the bunkhouse were not more than fifty feet from him, three of them still on their feet. One stopped suddenly, clutching at his midriff, and Bud heard again the crack of the rifle on the right. Bud downed one of the remaining two and the other kept coming. From his shape Bud knew it was Sam Duncan, the deputy.

"Drop your gun, Sam," Bud yelled.

"Go to hell!" Duncan snarled and threw another shot at Bud.

(*Continued on page* 74)

Only one of these partners realized it was time to pull out as they were drawing from their claim little more than a third of their previous take—but both men realized that they were the only two who knew their take in gold had been cached and for this the enlightened partner found it imperative to make a quick trip to

BOOTHILL AND BACK AGAIN

"I'll shut yuh up once an' fer all!" he shouted. "Until yuh can't hurt me!"

THEY HAD trailed into Vermilion Creek together, these two, among the first sourdoughs to penetrate the area, and had staked their claims side by side at what was then the highest holdings on the creek.

But things were different now. They were among the lower, nearer-to-civilization inhabitants now, and they both knew that their diggings had reached a peak. Already they were beginning to slack off. Too, there was a growing element of suspicion and animal self-preservation cropping up that had not heretofore existed—like wolves feeding upon a carcass; a distrust, a smoldering ember laying dormant, waiting for the first ill wind to whip it to destructive violence.

Bert Sloan and Jim Drake had worked their two claims as partners, spending close to an equal amount of time on each, but always splitting what they took. They had been partners a long time, long before either of them laid eyes upon the rich prospects of Vermilion Creek, and yet they were as

By
VIVIAN N.
WHITE

ILLUSTRATED BY
NEWTON ALFRED

unlike as two men could possibly be.

Sloan was a large man with a black beard that appeared shaggy and unkempt, hair that hung long and also shaggy, almost to his shoulders, eyes the color of slate, and as brittle, and muscles that stood out bulky and almost grotesque beneath his plaid shirt.

Drake could almost have crawled into one of Sloan's boots, there was that much difference.

He was thin-chested and narrow of hip, and no amount of heavy work with pick and shovel seemed to be able to cover his scrawny frame with meat and weight. He didn't have a beard like Sloan's. In the first place, he preferred to keep clean-shaven, even though his only company was that of Sloan. In the second place, it was a stubble the color of damp sand, like his hair, and it didn't show up much if he did permit it to grow. His eyes were large and gray, set in a slender face above a narrow mouth and thin nose.

Not only in appearance did the two differ but in disposition as well.

Sloan was as gruff as his bear-like stature indicated. He was exceedingly loquacious and never tired of boasting of past feats, when outside the company of Drake. He knew better than to start in before his partner because Drake would only smile and say, "Now, Bert. You're talkin' to me now—Drake. Remember?" And Bert would immediately find something else to do or say, trying to make it appear casual. He never read much but there was something about the great outdoors that thrilled him with all of the childhood mysteries of nature.

Jim Drake, on the other hand, was a bookworm. Night after night he sat in camp by the glow of a dim yellow lantern and read. It made little difference what it was that he might be reading. They were all interesting to him. Sometimes he would talk to Bert about what he had read but the big man never appeared interested, and presently Jim would stop.

Jim didn't usually talk much, however. When they'd all be gathered around Limpy Bill's trading post over on the edge of Trout Lake, Jim would do a lot of listening, not missing a thing, but if he talked, it was only because someone had looked him square in the eye and asked, "How're things pannin' out on that claim of your'n Jim?" And he'd reply indifferently, "About as well as one could expect, I suppose." With that his questioner would nod and turn back to the general babble of the group and Jim would sit back on an upturned block of wood, his thin arms folded across his flat chest, apparently just waiting for someone to say something directly to him again.

He never drank. He'd keep an eye on Bert and when the latter was beginning to feel his liquor, Jim would say quietly, "Let's go, Bert. We got to be on the job again early in the morning, you know." Sometimes he had to say it a second time, but usually the one suggestion was enough. Bert would stare at him a moment, those slate eyes of his deep, burning pits of resentment, then he would nod curtly and say to the boys, "Wait'll next time I'm in, I'll show yuh how much I can drink!" And with that he would meekly follow Jim back to camp.

VERMILION Creek had not had a name when they first came in. That had come with time and the fact that the greed for gold had led to murders and claim-jumping. It was the blood that had washed the length of the creek that had given it the name Vermilion.

Jim was well aware of that blood. There was something in the strange gleam in Bert's eyes these past weeks as he stood leaning on a pick or sitting before the fire at night, silently whittling, that made Jim vastly aware of his own blood. He did not want to lose it!

Tonight it had been more evident than ever. It had been while they were returning from work, Bert following at his heels as usual. Something kept burning into the base of Jim's neck, making him want to turn around and see what was wrong, like you feel when someone's staring at you. Bert had his pocket knife in his hand. Nothing was said. Bert cut away at a plug of chewing tobacco, and clasping the knife, dropped it unconcernedly back in his pocket. But it left Jim numb with fear and he wondered if his uneasiness was as evident to the larger man as to himself.

Now, with supper over, Jim sat digging into an old apple box that he called his office. For a while he sat with a pencil and paper, setting down columns of figures. Bert was whittling as usual. Presently he stopped and leaned tensely forward. "How much we got now?" he asked eagerly.

Jim did not respond at once. He kept on with the column of figures, added them carefully, and then replied, "We got ninety-nine thousand nine-hundred and eight dollars, way I figure it, Bert. Seen the time we'd reach our hundred tomorrow, but not now. Maybe two—three days yet, way things are now. We should sell, that's what we should do, get our hundred and then sell. Wouldn't get much but then it ain't worth much now. I hear there's some talk about maybe somethin' popping over in Indian Gulch. Could go there an' try our luck, or then maybe you'd like the towns a while. What do you think?"

"That hundred," Bert said hastily. "That between us?"

There was something in the way he said it that caused Jim to look quickly at him. Bert just sat there holding his knife, his

eyes cold and inscrutable. "Yeah," Jim answered, "that's between us."

"What'd a man do in town?" Bert flung back. "You, mebbe, could go to one of those public readin' rooms and set all day, but what'd a man like me do?"

Jim shrugged and suggested, "Then what do you want to do, try Indian Gulch? You know as well as me, Bert, how long we've been at it, the places we've tried. This is the first time it's ever paid us back. They don't all pan well. You know that as well as me."

"I like it here," Bert said sullenly. "Maybe it ain't panning like it used to but I like it here."

"What is there here?" Jim scoffed. "Nothin' to hold me!"

"Mebbe there isn't for you," Bert said evenly, leaning forward on his seat. "Mebbe you'd like to get back to that girl you used to hang around in Kansas City!"

He grinned confidently as Jim's head shot up in astonishment.

"Wait a minute," Jim announced, beginning to understand. "Are you thinkin' about Limpy Bill's squaw? I've noticed you making eyes at her the last few times we been to the post, but I never thought—. You haven't got no business lookin' at her, Bert. She's Bill's, same as if she were his wife, married an' all. He'll kill you, if you go monkeying 'round her."

"Mebbe he won't know it," Bert replied assuredly, his eyes shining pin-points in the fire light. "Limpy doesn't get around so good."

He turned away from his small partner as if he were alone in the room. Staring into the fire, he soliloquized, "She's might purty. Purtiest I ever saw. An' she's way too young fer him."

Jim tried to voice the laugh that he could not feel. "You're just dreamin'," he argued. "You're nuts over her because she isn't fat like the rest. Well, just wait'll she gets old. She won't look so pretty then. Anyway, little chance you'd have takin' her away from him. You aren't so rich. Limpy's got as much as you. No, Bert, you'd have to have more than that."

"A hundred, mebbe?" Bert came back quickly, so quickly in fact that Jim wondered how long he had been thinking it!

Nothing more was said about either Limpy Bill and his squaw or disposing of the claims during the work that followed. It took them three days to run the total to the hundred mark, after which they decided that the next day they'd go to Limpy Bill's and celebrate.

"Don't know what we'll celebrate about," Bert complained as they set out upon the fifteen-mile hike. "Couple o' days we'll be back working again like always." But he made no effort to refuse to go along. Not and decline the chance to see the squaw.

JIM'S reticence was more apparent than usual as they proceeded along the well-used trail. He'd done a lot of thinking about Bert Sloan and himself. It was true that they had spent many a year together. They had never quarreled violently; they had never fought. And yet Jim knew of men whose continued comradeship had resulted in one or the other abruptly committing murder. Sometimes the solitude of long winter evenings was too much and they lost their heads. A man wanted someone to talk to, someone to confide in, but not somveone as unlike as himself and this bulky man who followed him along the trail.

Somehow he did not believe that Bert would ever openly murder him. Bert was too smart for that. That was one of the few times he'd listened, once when Jim had got hold of a detective book and read about how crime wasn't worth it. That had impressed Bert. He seemed to sense the power of the law.

Funny, Jim thought, how the man seemed so meek and dumb about some things and yet so shrewd about others. Take gold, for instance, no man could tell him anything about gold. And the realization about how dangerous it might be to make eyes at the old trader's squaw. He knew he was overstepping his right there and yet he was the kind that would go after whatever he wanted, using the most careful plan that his strangely working mind would conceive.

What that might be, Jim could only guess. He could not interpret Bert, as in the old days. Maybe it was this squaw that was doing it; maybe it was the solitude. But whatever, Jim felt certain that Bert would only bide his time until the right opportunity presented itself, and then get rid of him. Can't watch the man every

minute day after day, he reasoned to himself. Bert didn't know it yet, but he, Jim, was pulling up stakes. He wondered how Bert would take it when he was told.

He remembered the look in Bert's eyes as the latter considered what he could do with a hundred thousand. That had been the clincher. He thought about the way they'd made out their claims.

When they filed they had both signed papers to the effect that in case of the death of either, the other was to receive all. That's what the papers said. And that would be Bert Sloan's hundred!

No, Jim decided, he wouldn't tell Bert anything about his plans to sell. Bert would get into the post and start making eyes or drinking. If he wanted to drink this time, Jim was determined not to stop him or take him home. After all, they were going in to celebrate!

Limpy Bill's trading post rested back in the evergreens just off the north shore of Trout Lake. The lake had not been wrongly named. Trout were plentiful, it being the only waterway near that afforded good fishing. Limpy Bill never had to fish; his visitors did it for him. They'd come in for the night, or maybe two, and fish for their meals. Limpy weighed the fish and deducted it from their bill of fare.

The trader hadn't been there prior to the strike. It was the latter that brought him in. And the lake being the most suitable place to set up a post, and just far enough away to avoid most of the clamor, he had lost no time erecting it. No one knew much about his young squaw. First, Bill was alone, then one day she was there. Most folks said he'd probably taken her on a trade.

WHEN Jim and Bert reached the post it was not yet noon. There weren't many around, the two being a day early. Most would still be working claims until tomorrow. Bill was there, though. He hobbled his old lean frame behind the boarded-up bench-like affair he called a bar and set out two glasses and a bottle. Jim shook his head as Bert approached the bar.

"I know it," Bill chimed in. "Hell, y'ain't ever taken a nip long's I've known yuh. Think I'm so old I be forgetting? These two're fer me an' Bert, here." To Bert he added slyly: "That pardner o' yourn be one hell o' a one to git snake bit."

Maybe he expected it to bring forth a laugh. It didn't. Instead, Bert looked at him queerly and then repeated, "Snake bit?"

The old man flashed him a quick look of surprise, not seeing in that queer glassy stare the significance Jim knew was behind it. He offered in explanation, "Sure, don't a man always need whisky for snake bite?"

But Bert didn't hear him. If he did, there was no indication of it. His eyes kept straying around. Jim could notice it now where he might have overlooked it before. Most of all they kept lighting upon the door that led to Limpy Bill's private quarters.

"We made our stake, Bill," Jim began lightly. "Reached the hundred mark; that's been our aim. Calls for a celebration."

"Most things call fer a celebration of some sort," Bill reflected sagely, "fer the man that likes his drink, but fer you—." He despairingly shook his head.

Jim laughed. "I'll get along," he said tersely.

He began looking around for a prospective buyer. Of course, they wouldn't want to give much. First thing they'd wonder was why he was leaving. He couldn't tell them that! Hell, you didn't just up and tell a man you were scared to death your partner was going to knife you in your sleep some night. Well, not quite that bad, but death just as surely and lastingly as if a knife had done it! No, you didn't tell a man that. You'd just take what you could get and light out while you were all in one piece. Maybe you didn't have to tell Bert at all. But how could you keep from it? You had to go back to camp with the man after your duffel. Yes, you had to tell him!

There were a few men already loafing about. Jim didn't know any of them except to recognize them as familiar faces occasionally seen before around the post. Later, he decided. There would be plenty of time to discuss business. Wait till Bert was out of the way. Say, why not sell it to Bill? Not likely that he would work it on his own but he'd be in a spot where he could pass it on or get someone to work it on shares.

So thinking, Jim silently turned and walked out of the room. For a minute he stood staring out across the lake before him. Later he walked down to the little boathouse and stood upon the platform that

reached out into the clear blue water. It was cool, inviting.

He stood there and watched the soft ripples out across the lake, the line of timber perhaps two miles distant that came down from the far mountain to the verdant dampness, and spread thick-needled branches out over the line of shore. From here they blended with the water.

It was maybe a half hour later that a

The canoe gave a sudden lurch and flopped over, and Jim was thrown sprawling into the water's currents.

rear side door, up in the big building, slammed and a woman stood momentarily on the stoop, then hurried to the woodpile, picked up an armful of wood already cut, disappearing again, Her black hair hung in two shining braids across her slender shoulders. Her face possessed the rich brown of hours in the summer sun. No darker. And yet he knew it had not been the sun. But Bert was right. She was pretty! And she had a figure. He'd seen many a one worse.

HE walked back into the building again and up to Limpy Bill. Bert was still drinking. The big black-bearded man tossed down the rest of a slug and said anxiously, "You talk to him fer a change, Jim. I'm going out fer some air."

Jim watched him go out the door. Would Bert walk down to the boathouse as he himself had done? Or did Bert want Jim to hold the old trader in conversation while he went around back to talk to the girl?

"I went down to the landing," Jim said casually. "It was cooler down there."

"Why don't you go out on the lake?" Bill suggested. "Ain't never been out, have you?"

Jim shook his head. "You needin' fish?" he asked.

The old trader grinned slyly. "I could use 'em, I reckon, if you two're figuring to stay the night," he admitted. "They'd come in right handy."

Jim didn't answer him. He kept standing there, running a finger in and out of a puddle on the bar. "Bill," he announced suddenly, "how'd you like to buy a claim?"

Limpy Bill grinned, exposing a few scattered tobacco-stained teeth. He spat suddenly into a can and shifted his quid to the other jaw. "Pullin' out?" he asked.

Jim nodded, glancing toward the door. "Ain't convinced Bert yet that it's best, but I know it is. We've taken the tops. I wouldn't lie to you 'bout that. We aren't takin' but 'bout a third o' what we was. That's all right but I'm gettin' restless. Got what I started in after an' I got a hunkerin' fer the big city."

Limpy Bill nodded understandingly. "But what would I do with it?" he asked curiously.

"Sell it," Jim suggested, "or put somebody on it."

Bert came up to the door, pausing to glance back.

"Don't say nothin' about it to Bert yet," Jim advised. "I want to talk it over with him first."

The trader nodded, watching Bert come through the door. "Why don't you two go out an' catch us some trout?" he suggested.

Bert hesitated, mumblingly searching for an excuse to remain. Presently he said, "Get Jim out there? I'll bet you couldn't get him near the water. Why, whenever he gets waist deep in Vermilion Creek he starts hollerin and cussin' and comes climbin' back out!"

Jim grinned, waving an arm to indicate his short height. "Don't take much water," he replied, "to get up around my neck. An' I'm one guy that always likes to keep my head out of water!"

But he wanted to please the trader and, besides, now that he'd started the deal, he had to tell Bert. Why not tell him out there?

Bill furnished the equipment. They caught bait, gathered up tackle, and took a canoe. Jim permitted Bert to take over the leadership and he handled it with the skill of a craftsman. He stepped in the center over the keel, allowing Jim to seat himself. Then he shoved away from the landing and began paddling.

"Now I'll tell him," Jim thought. "Better before we get too far off shore." And then he got to thinking. He remembered the look in Bert's eye, the way he'd dwelled on the snake bite conversation. Hell, why should he go on kidding himself? Bert was just biding his time. Why not put it to a test? Why not find out here and now? It would be better than waiting, uncertain, never knowing from one minute to the next.

Bert probably didn't think Jim could swim. He didn't particularly care for cold water and Bert had never seen him in, except as he said, "up to his waist."

They were out in the middle. A soft breeze kept carrying them toward the opposite shore. Jim braced himself. He could feel the muscles tense in his throat. Now was the time!

"Bert," he said, trying to sound casual, but the word came out hoarse and vibrant! He went on: "I've been thinkin' more and more about it an' I'd be a fool not to sell. Maybe you're right. Maybe it is Kansas City.

But, anyway, I got what I wanted. It's time to play a while."

Bert regarded him quietly, his slate eyes mere pencil points. "You're kiddin'," he said abruptly.

Jim shook his head. "I'm serious," he insisted. "I talked to Limpy Bill. I think he'll take it for me!"

BERT dropped the paddle. It floated out away from the canoe. The big man leaped wildly to his feet, taking a step forward. "You just try to sell," he hissed, "an' I'll—" He stopped suddenly, his big fists clenching and opening.

"Hey, take it easy!" Jim warned, shrinking away. And then he said a strange thing. His eyes widened and he blurted swiftly, "Don't tip this thing over, Bert! I don't want to drown!"

Bert sat down slowly but his eyes never wavered. A coarse grin parted the black beard in half. For a moment Jim surprisingly believed that the man was only a bluff. And then the canoe gave a sudden lurch and flopped over. Jim was thrown sprawling into the water. Vaguely he recalled having seen Bert hitting the water, too, and then the foaming surface swept over his head.

Jim came up yelling. A wave of water caught his open mouth, half strangling him, shutting off the screams. He went down again! Up! He saw Bert splashing twenty feet away. Couldn't tell whether he was coming nearer or not.

Jim fought around in a wildly splashing half turn that left him facing the canoe. It was bottom side up, also about twenty feet away. Jim went down again, this time purposely. He swam under water until the shadow of the canoe passed above him. His boots were as heavy as iron weights! He came up again gently.

As he had hoped, the canoe partially screened him from Bert. The big man was quietly treading water, watching the spot where Jim had last gone down. He glanced toward the canoe, and Jim made a silent submersion, presently returning to the surface. But Bert made no attempt to save his partner.

Jim kept going under, whenever Bert's eyes searched for him. For fifteen minutes Bert stayed there, the latter five spent paddling around the immediate area, occasionally trying to look down, glancing fearfully at the canoe. And Jim kept his distance, always on the other side of the canoe. After a while Bert lengthened out and set a course for the landing, swimming with long, powerful overhand strokes that convinced Jim that he had long since become rid of his heavy boots.

Jim took that opportunity to move around in the opposite direction, keeping the canoe for a screen. He waited until Bert had gone some distance and then he removed his own boots, rolled over on his back so he could watch, swam low, and cruised toward the nearer verdant shore directly across from the landing. When he knew that he was beyond any watching eye, he rolled over again, and with nose parting the water like a beaver, swam in an easy breast stroke—leg kick, arm pull, leg kick—moving gracefully, speedily to shore.

There he put on his shoes and struck out through the heavy timber for the end of the lake and a direct line to Vermilion Creek. Well, he knew now what Bert's plans had been. Right now Jim Drake was supposed to be at the bottom of the lake! He could hear Bert explaining. Maybe Jim hooked a fish and got excited, tipped the boat over. Bert tried to save him but just couldn't make it in time. He'd tell it something like that. And what could they do? Nothing, absolutely nothing! Bert would have his hundred!

"Not if I get back to camp first," Jim soliloquized, setting a quick pace through the woods. Every ounce of that gold was cached where only the two could find it. Wouldn't Bert be surprised to find it gone!

Jim got back to Vermilion Creek just before dark. He approached the cabin cautiously, not taking any chances. But it was just as they had left it. Nothing was stirring along the length of creek about him. He remembered that Lank Wilson had invited everyone thereabouts to join him in celebrating his birthday at the post tomorrow. Evidently they had all departed early.

Jim went inside and ate some cold jerky, and felt better. Had to make up a light pack, enough to get out of the country. He took plenty, wondering if Bert would notice it. Then he decided to go to the cache.

Light out and leave Bert to follow him? Maybe he should wait here and meet him when he came in with the squaw. And then

Jim struck upon what seemed to him the best solution of all, one that would cure Bert once and for all, one that would leave him trembling and afraid; yes, as afraid as Jim had been when the big man sat toying with his knife.

JIM took a rifle off the wall, got plenty of cartridges, and retired to a near-by spruce thicket. There he bedded down for the night, watching a slender strip of moon climb its slow arc across the sky. Occasionally he dozed but each awakening assured him that Bert had not yet returned.

Near daybreak he moved, climbing the narrow rocky ledge that took him into the broken bouldered hillside above the creek. For a time he paused, observing a stretch ahead where the going was precarious. Below him was a sheer drop of sixty feet into Vermilion Creek. He remembered the spot for he had once waded it—"up to his waist," Bert had said.

Jim climbed higher, found a spot where he could observe trail, claims, and cabin, and yet be safely protected, and settled down. He breakfasted on jerky.

About ten o'clock he recognized the figure coming jauntily down the trail. He was alone. Jim idly wondered about the squaw, as quickly forgot her. Before the cabin door Bert paused, took a revolver out of his belt. Jim knew why. He had purposely left the cabin door standing open. Bert disappeared inside. Abruptly he came rushing out and straight along the creek, past a conspicuous sand pile to a lone flat rock. The damn' fool! Anyone could be laying here instead, watching to locate the cache! What a fool trick!

Bert removed the rock, paused, replaced it, rose again. Now he was more satisfied. He returned to the cabin.

Just somebody passing through, Bert. You thought it was me but I'd have taken the dust, wouldn't I? You can relax—awhile. So thought Jim, not breathing a word.

Smoke rolled out the chimney as Bert prepared dinner. Jim, doing on his bit, could almost smell it way up here.

After noon Bert came out again, grabbed up a pick and set to work in the creek.

Jim cupped his hands to his mouth, and letting the words roll deep in his throat, weirdly shouted, "H-a-l-l-o, B-e-r-r-t! I-t'-s J-i-m-m-m-m!" Across the canyon it rolled and beat against the opposite hill! "H-a-l-l-o, B-e-r-r-t! I-t'-s J-i-m!" Down Vermilion Creek! "H-a-l-l-o, B-e-r-r-t! I-t's J-i-m-m-m!"

Bert dropped the pick and stood braced, clutching the revolver at his belt. Slowly he turned around. There was no sound except the soft breeze in the spruce thicket and the contented murmur of the creek. Bert gathered up the pick.

Ten minutes and Jim cupped his hands again. "H-a-l-l-o, B-e-r-r-t! I-t'-s J-i-m!" Across the canyon! Down Vermilion Creek! He looked up the hillside. He stared across the canyon. Then he started out at a run for the cabin, shutting himself up within it.

Jim waited until Bert appeared an hour later. This time he stood cautiously in the door. Again Jim shouted the same words, listened to them echo and re-echo. Bert came to the corner, clutched the rough logs until his fists drained white. "Yore dead, dammit!" he screamed wildly. "I saw you die!"

Jim uttered the words again, just to prove Bert was wrong. This time Bert located the sound. He stared at the hillside and it seemed his eyes searched Jim out of the very jumble of rocks from which he peered. Bert took the gun from his belt, emptying it. Lead screamed and whined its way off of rocks to Jim's right and left. He never moved. In answer to the metallic snap upon an empty chamber he cupped his hands again and repeated, "H-a-l-l-o, B-e-r-r-t! I-t'-s J-i-m-m-m!" He liked the ghostly sound that the echo gave it. Bert whirled and ran once more within the cabin.

He didn't return again during the afternoon. Jim found pleasure in timing himself. Every fifteen minutes to the second he repeated the words, though no reply emanated from the cabin below.

Night came and with it the moon, for which he was thankful. It eliminated all danger of ambush. Jim sped up his schedule, making it five minutes to the second. Twelve times every hour that ghost-like voice broke the stillness. Toward morning Jim shuddered at the mere thought of it. What a hell of a night for a man to spend, listening to the voice of the one he thought in boothill! But Bert stood it all night. He stood it until the first gray streaks of daybreak when he appeared in the doorway.

It was plain to see that he hadn't slept. His eyes were sunken, as black as the beard below them. His hair was in strings as if huge fingers had torn relentlessly through, again and again. In his hand he carried a rifle. Now he aimed it at the quiet hillside, fired, fired again and again! Then he disappeared.

Jim repeated the call. "H-a-l-l-o, B-e-r-e-t!" he said. "I-t'-s J-i-m-m-m!" Again it whipped across the canyon, down it. Bert came flying out the door like a crazy man, screaming as he ran.

"Damn yuh!" he threatened. "I'll shut yuh up once an' fer all! I'll Jim yuh till there ain't nothin' left to haunt nobody!"

He reached the foot of the hill, began his perilous ascent. Jim waited until Bert was paused before the most treacherous of all. Maybe he could stop him there. He looked down at the rifle in his own hands and found himself hoping he wouldn't have to kill his partner. Why didn't Bert flee? Leave the country! That would be the best lesson.

"Don't come on, Bert," he whispered pleadingly. "Don't make me do it!"

He cupped his hands again. "H-a-l-l-o, B-e-r-r-t! I-t'-s J-i-m-m-m!"

The big black-bearded man whirled upon the narrow ledge, screaming crazily, "Shut up!" he shouted. The rifle at his shoulder bucked. The slug came very near Jim's cheek, ricocheting off a stone. Gray smoke rolled out the rifle barrel. Again it puffed. Again, again and again! Jim forgot to count them, there were so many!

Bert raised the empty rifle high above his head, shook it threateningly. "That shut yuh up," he dared, his voice gurgling, babbling like a maniac. "Just show me it didn't!"

"H-a-l-l-o—"

Bert let the rifle drop arm length to his huge right hand. An unintelligible scream poured from his thick lips as he leaned far back and gave the rifle a mighty heave upward.

"—take that, yuh damned ghost!" Bert screamed, and then Jim saw Bert's feet go out from under him. For a breath-taking second he paused half-suspended upon the edge, then disappeared from sight while a heart-rending cry of agony rolled up to Jim.

Jim thought he heard a splash, wasn't sure. Maybe he imagined it. Water—"up to his waist!"

Jim shuddered, rose from his position. It was cold. "Colder'n hell!" he soliloquized. "The middle of the summer an' colder'n hell!"

He looked down upon the cabin, glanced over at the claim, refused to look at the creek and the foot of the cliff. The cabin, the claim, they didn't appeal to him; the cache of dust, yes, but not the cabin or the claim. Not Vermilion Creek.

He shook his head violently, trying to forget it. He drove it from him and tried to think of better things. He thought—of a girl in Kansas City.

"You're a steady two-some . . ." That's what everyone will say when you get to know

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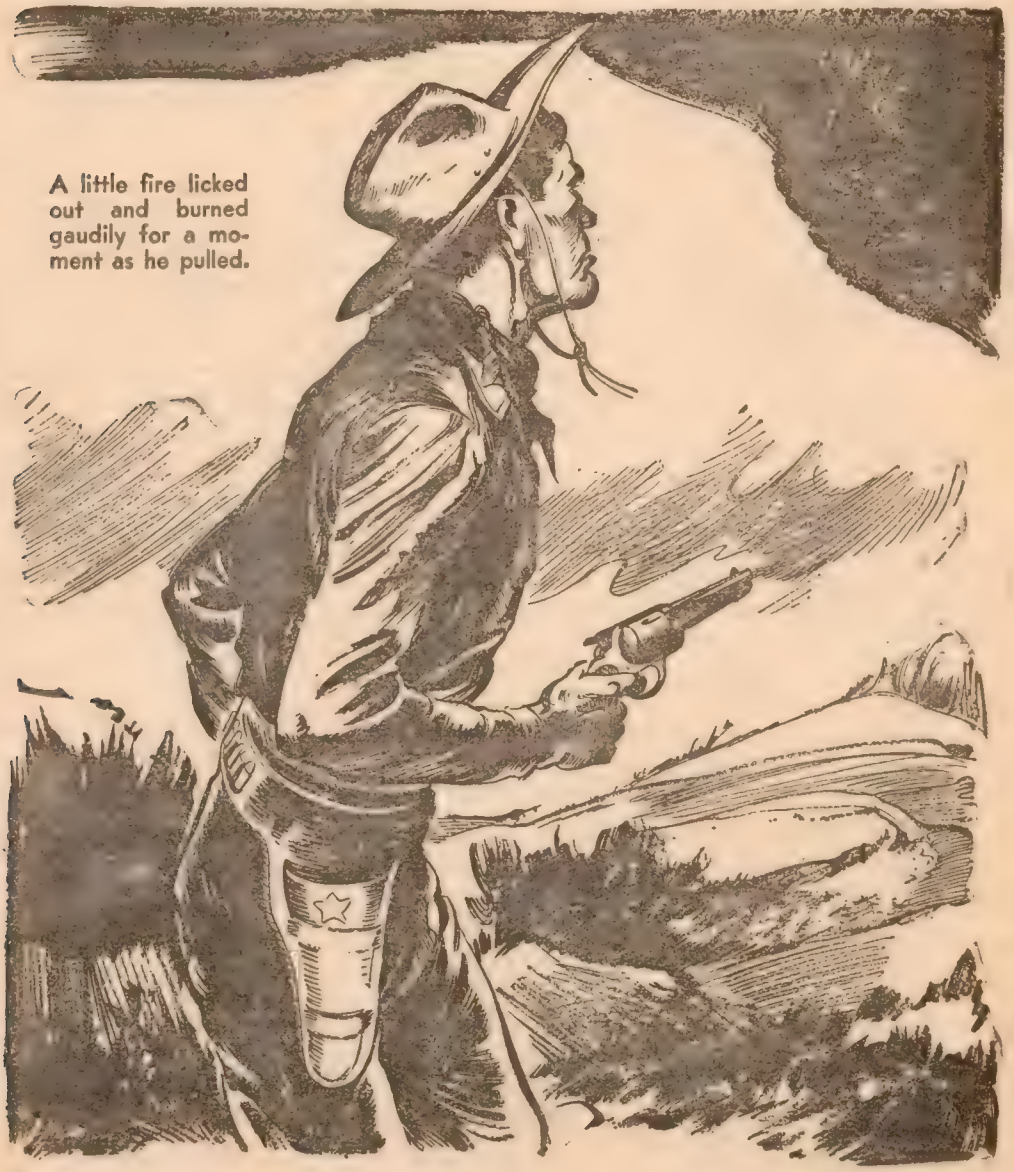
Death Is The Sidekick

By JOHN JO CARPENTER

THE TOWN of Breckinridge, Oklahoma, was sweltered in a blazing September dog-days afternoon, and old Sheriff Denny Craig sat in his office, with his scuffed boots on his scuffed desk and let it swelter. It seemed to him it was hotter than it used to get this time of year. Or maybe he was just getting old. Maybe he was just wearing out. Maybe impending trouble was grating him with more worry than a man of sixty should handle.

In the back room it was still hotter but



A little fire licked out and burned gaudily for a moment as he pulled.

If a man's got to die soon, what's he got to fear from the likes of two mean owlhooters? That's what Buster Craig thought and he knew it was a lack of caution any man with long-life intentions didn't have—but his particular aims had to be rushed!

no sound came from his son. Buster Craig, at thirty, stood six-feet-two and a half. He weighed two-ten in his working clothes, which consisted of ordinary range garb plus a worn, shiny deputy's badge.

He lay on a bunk used for prisoners when the jail was full, with his face to the wall. Not a sound came from him.

The sheriff had been listening for ten minutes for the sound of a man outside. It

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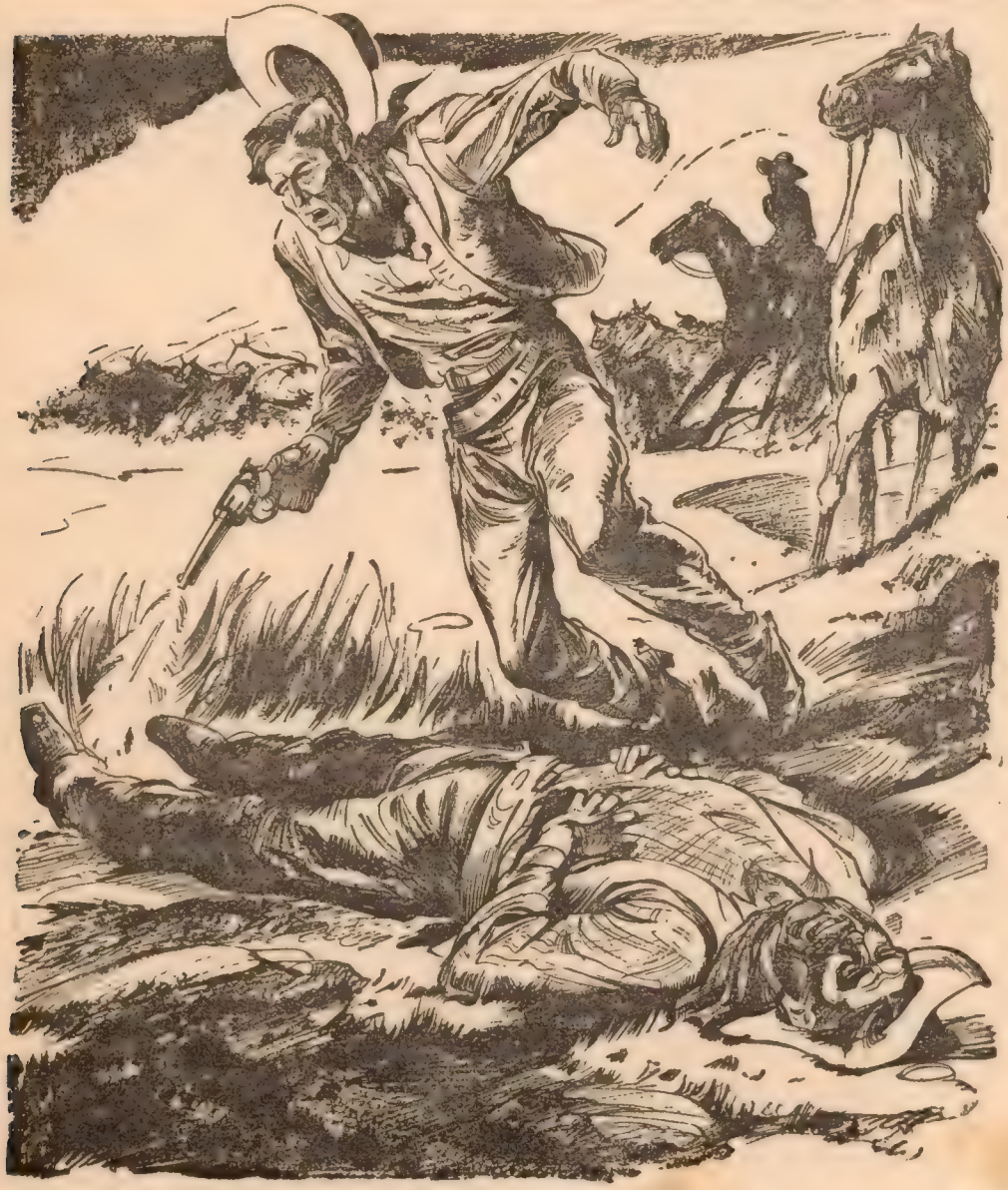

came at last, a rapid thumping up the plank walk. Dr. Hoyt Westfall came in breathlessly, followed by Denny's other deputy, old Jim Breedon. The doctor was about Buster's age but he looked older. He had a dark, grave face and something about his eyes that the sheriff liked.

He came in and set his bag down, breathing hard.

"I was up in Injun town, looking to the sick papooses. That's why I'm late, Denny. Heart acting up again?" he asked.

The sheriff pushed away the stethescope. "It ain't me, Doc." He jerked his thumb toward the back room. "It's Buster. Go see what's wrong with him."

"Buster?" The doctor frowned incredulously. "My opinion has always been that you couldn't kill Buster with a broad-ax. What's wrong with him?"

The sheriff flushed beenath the coating of tan on his weathered, elathery, wrinkled face.

"Stummick, he says. He's had two or three stummick attacks before. Mebbe that's what it is. I hope so." He swallowed and went on stubbornly, his face growing redder. "Somehow them attacks always come on when there's trouble about. Doc, I hate to say it of my own son but maybe it's his heart, not his stummick. Maybe he's just got a streak of yaller in him. That's what I want you to find out."

The doctor was embarrassed, when a stirring from the back room showed that Buster had heard.

"Oh, I wouldn't be too hasty, Sheriff. Stomachs are funny things," Doc said.

"I know they be," the sheriff went on shamefacedly. "What I want to know is—how funny. Buster had an attack when he rode down in the mesquite brakes south of here and found we had the Sims gang cornered there. He had another attack the night of the riot at the medicine show when Earl Carr shot the can-can dancer's husband. He had one when we hanged Frank Stevens for knifin' the Indian."

It hurt the old ma nto say this. His granite face, twisted mouth, hot eyes, showed the doctor this. Yet he railed on.

"Doc, Earl Carr and Jim Dunseth are ten miles south of here this minute. Jimmy and I turned them back two years ago when they tried to drive through here but Jimmy's old now, and so am I, and Buster's able-bodied. Earl and Jim Dunseth ain't cattlemen, Doc. They're buyers and brokers and commission men and trail-drive bosses. They're bad medicine. They have twenty-eight hundred head of wild Texas cattle and they're comin' through town tonight—unless they're stopped."

"Why stop them?" the doctor asked quietly.

Jim Breedon spoke up then.

"You don't know them, Doc. You ain't been here long enough. This is one of the towns where the trail herds used to fight it out. It was a regular thing to see two outfits try to meet here to see which went through first. That was ten, twenty years ago. Nobody runs cows like hat any more except Earl Carr and Jim Dunseth. Those two—well, they're crazy. They're mean! And they been turned back once. They allow they'll hell-for-leather right through town with that twenty-eight hundred head. Doc, they mean trouble and they've got eleven men with them."

THE doctor, raised in the east, knew nothing of the rivalries among trail drives, and the names, Earl Carr and Jim Dunseth, meant nothing to him. Denny Craig and Jimmy Breedon were old, worried men. Denny had let his shame over his big, hulking son distort his judgment. The doctor shrugged and reached for his kit.

"I guess you know what you're talking about," he said. "Where's the patient?"

He went into the back room and Buster Craig sat up swiftly.

He was a handsome man in a flashy, sullen sort of way. His father and mother had been separated for years and Buster had been reared by his mother until her death five years ago. Not until then had he returned to his father, who had tried promptly to mold him into the tough shape of himself.

"I don't need no doctor," Buster said savagely. "I just got one of those stummick attacks!"

The doctor turned around and saw Denny and Jimmy looking in through the door. He went over and closed it firmly in their surprised faces. Then he came back to the bed and sat down on a three-legged stool.

"A man doesn't have stomach attacks

without a reason. What are the symptoms?" he asked in his quiet voice.

"A hellish-hot pain right here," Buster said in a moment, rubbing his flat, athlete's stomach.

"Does it come and go, or is it steady?"

"Well, it's steady, but sometimes it throbs."

"Does it hurt worse empty or after you've been eating?"

He led Buster along with matter-of-fact questions and at last got him to remove his shirt. He examined him carefully, with a rapt frown on his face. His expert fingers prodded the sore spots until he could locate them without Buster telling where they were.

The examination took fotry minutes. He closed his stethescope case, dropped it into the kit, and took out a brown bottle of pills. He shook four of the pills out in his palm and handed them to Buster.

"These are pretty strong but they'll make the pain easier," he said. "I'd take one now, maybe one late tonight if you can't sleep, but no more than that today. Don't take the third one until eight tomorrow and he fourth not before noon. I'll see you then."

Buster laid his big hand on the doctor's thin shoulder. His voice trembled with apprehension.

"Doc, what's the matter with me?"

The doctor looked away and said, "I'm not sure, Bus. These stomach things can fool you. I want to get Dr. Brophy down from Ponca City to look at you. I'll send a note up to him on the afternoon stage—or would you rather go see him?"

He started to turn away with his kit but the giant deputy reached out and pulled him back.

"Doc, dang yuh, don't try any mystery stuff on me. If they's something wrong with me, I want to know."

The doctor pulled himself loose angrily and something in his stern eyes made Buster relax his fingers' grip.

"And when I know what's wrong, I'll tell you! Good day."

He went out into the other room and closed the door behind him.

"Well?" said Sheriff Denny Craig.

"I don't know. I'm asking Dr. Brophy to consult."

The gnarled, tough little lawman barred the door.

"No you don't, Doc! Spit it out. He's my boy, coward or no, and you're not lettin' any Ponca City man know about it. If I'd wanted Doc Brophy to know my family affairs, I'd have sent for him. What's wrong with Buster?"

The doctor shrugged again and said, quietly, "Cancer."

"Cancer!"

THE exclamation burst from both old men and one seemed as staggered as the other. It was as good as a sentence of death —a slow death, a lingering one, a chain of days of agony in which Buster's big body would melt and bleed away a pound at a time.

"I'm not sure." The doctor suddenly shook his head. "Of course I'm sure! But a man likes confirmation of a diagnosis like that. Don't tell Buster. And of course he can't go out on any wild escapades such as you're planning for that trail-drive crew. I gave him some morphine tablets. Keep him quiet. A fight — any excitement—could shorten his life a year. I'm sorry, Denny."

The old man staggered until he had to lean on the table for support. His leathery face contorted. His mouth worked.

"My boy! My Buster! Cancer—and I thought he just had a yaller streak in him! I'd have sent him out ag'in Earl Carr and Jim Dunseth and he with a cancer in his stummick!"

"Now, Denny." Old Jimmy Breedon whimpered. "You didn't know."

The door was flung back suddenly and Buster Craig stood there. He had his hat on the back of his head and he was buttoning the last buttons on his gray shirt. He gave he doctor a hard, hate-filled look as he tucked the tails under his belt.

"So that's it! I've got a cancer. How long does a man keep his feet with that?" he snarled. "A year?"

"Maybe."

"Less?"

"Maybe."

"More?"

"Maybe. The patient's guess is as good as the doctor's."

Buster unexpectedly laughed but his gray face had aged ten years and his eyes were smoky with the apprehension of death.

He turned and faced his father.

"You thought I was yaller, Pa, didn't you? Oh, don't argue maybe I was! I guess a man facin' death owes it to himself to tell the truth. I *am* yaller. I wouldn't blame you if you kicked me out, Pa, because you ain't got a yaller spot in you the size of a horse-fly's left eye—no, nor a crooked one, either! Pa, I just want to say that you loom up as considerable of a man to me."

"Why, Buster," Denny said feebly, "I thank you . . . but I didn't mean . . . I don't aim for you to think . . . I never said—"

Buster laughed again. He went to his desk in the corner and yanked a drawer with such violence that it came all the way out, spilling a .45 Colt and a box of shells on the floor. He stooped and picked them up.

From another drawer he took a worn holster and laced it around his middle. He filled the loops with brightly evil-looking cartridges, inspected the gun expertly and dropped it into the holster. Another mirthless grin crossed his straight mouth as his eyes met his father's.

Denny asked, "Son, what do you aim to do?"

"Pa," said Buster, "I'm yore deputy. I'm heading out to have me a little talk about this and that with Earl Carr and Jim Dunseth. I'm goin' to shove a little law down their throats and tamp it down with my finger. If they gag, someone'll pity them, for I won't."

"Son you're a sick—"

Buster laughed oddly.

"The funny thing, Pa, is this—*I ain't scared!* I reckon maybe I'm old Denny Craig's get, for sure now. I allow maybe I feel about like you feel all the time. If a man't got to die soon anyway, what's he got to fear from the likes of Carr and Dunseth? Maybe they'll keep me company on the trail out o' this world. Maybe they'll go ahead and break trail for me. So long, Pa—and it's been dang nice to have you for a dad."

HE went out, thumping Jimmy Breedon and the doctor on the back. He was out of sight before it dawned on old Denny what he meant to do. With a hoarse yell, the old man bolted after him.

But as he reached the door he tottered and slumped to his knees, and only Jimmy Breedon's quick action kept him from falling on his face.

"Heart!" He panted when they turned him over. The doctor caught the wild, telltale beat of his pulse and compressed his lips.

"Danged old turnip ketched me. Jimmy, ride after him! Bring the fool back. He's just a big, crazy kid and those hounds will murder him."

"You know he won't listen to me," Jimmy said in a troubled voice.

"Then *make* him come back! Draw down on him."

"Denny, that kid can get that gun out with that big ham paw of his whilst I'm makin' up my mind to reach for mine."

Denny appealed breathlessly to the doctor.

"He'll listen to you, Doc. Scare him back! Tell him he'll die if he don't come back, or somethin'. Doc, he's your patient."

"So are you, Denny." The doctor had his stethescope out now and was listening to the sheriff's stout but tired old heart. He made up his mind quickly. "I guess you'll last and maybe I had better go after him. Let's lift him up, Jimmy."

They heard Buster ride away as they carried the old sheriff back to the bed his son had been occupying. The doctor gave some drops for Denny and told Jimmy to keep him quiet, and for neither of them to worry. Denny's heart seemed normal now but it was unsafe to tell him so. The only thing that kept him from riding after his son was fear he would not live to reach his horse.

The doctor was not a good horseman and his horse was not a good horse. He followed the wide, well-defined trail and never once caught sight of Buster Craig until he was close enough to see the tall column of dust that marked the milling Carr-Dunseth herd. The longhorns had been stopped in a watering-place that had been used by northbound trail herds for a generation. It was a valley, shallow but with natural elevations that helped keep restless critters bunched. There was water here, from a sluggish creek, and ample feed in all directions.

He saw Buster Craig waiting on his horse at the side of the trail a half-mile from the nearest Carr-Dunseth outrider. The outrider, a short, blue-shirted man on a

small pinto, was stationed at the north end of the little valley, where he had no difficulty holding back the herd. Buster divided his attention between this man and the doctor, until the latter rode up.

anized that poky old mare." Buster thrust out his big, stubborn jaw. All of the weak

"I thought it was you! Thought I reck-

boyishness was gone from his heavy face and the sullenness in his eyes had a menace to it now. "You'd better beat it back to town, Doc, and mind your own business."

He said it insultingly, tauntingly. The doctor flushed a little. But—

"You're my patient," he said quietly. "That's my business."

"Pshaw! Pa sent for you, not me. I got no respect for you, Doc. Let's get that straight. I'd rather have a Cherokee medicine man do a spook-dance over me than trust your pills. Now go on home."

"I'll stay here," the doctor said. "It's a free country." Buster's face reddened and the doctor went on sharply, "There is certainly no danger *here*, this far from their herd! Or perhaps you had already noticed that, Buster?"

Buster flushed.

"Oh, that's the tune, eh? Let me show you something."

He whirled his big horse and spurred it down the trail. The doctor saw the outrider wheel the pinto and drop down to the ground. The doctor did not see the gun but he heard the bullet scream over him—and then came the drumming boom of a powerful rifle. He saw the cattle sweep back nervously. Another rider, a big man on a gray horse, spurred down the easterly elevation toward them, carrying a rifle over his head with one arm.

BUSTER Craig, with an agility surprising in his bulk, had dropped off his horse, dragging his heels in the dirt to stop the animal. The doctor had time to admire his gigantic strength and perfect horsemanship. Then Buster was running toward him, waving him back. The doctor turned his old mare and thumped her into her best stiff gait.

The rifle sent another slug screaming over them, another booming echo across the ground. Buster leaped on his horse and pulled it up short. He was laughing and panting and his dust-covered face was momentarily relieved of the death-shadow.

"Thought I was just scared, hey?" he asked. "Thought I just stopped there to rest my horse, did you? Now you see there's cautions a man don't learn in any medical college. He shot at me a spell back. Me and him have been sizin' each other up for about an hour now. What would you do?"

Dr. Westfall looked down toward the herd. Now there were five men clustered together and he could make out three rifles.

"I take it all back," he murmured.

Buster paid no attention. He was squinting at the men.

"The feller on the gray horse is Earl Carr. Dunseth is the short, square-built one with the black Mexican hat. The others I don't know but they'll be Pecos and Rio bottoms scum. You see, Carr and Dunseth make their livin' the hard way. Drive once a year what cows they can buy and a few for other small Texas cattlemen. Live on the earnin's while they last—and nobody knows how they make their living the rest of the year, except I'll guarantee it's not by honest work."

He studied them with narrowed eyes a long moment.

"Tonight they'll leave two or three men with the herd and head into Breckinridge—Pa's town—for a big blowout. They'll make what trouble they can and scare what people they can. Tomorrow they'll bring the herd through."

"Why not let them?" the doctor asked quietly. "Breckinridge began as a trail town, I understand. Didn't anybody think of just letting them through peaceably?"

Buster guffawed and kept his eyes on the tight knot of men. "You don't know what a trail is! You don't bring cows *through* a town, usually. There used to be eight, ten thousand head in single herds, sometimes five or six herds like that travellin' only a few hours apart. Cattle on a drive are loco! There have been bigger towns than Breckinridge wiped out, every buildin' laid flat, by herds on a stampede."

The doctor listened in awe as Buster went on.

"No, a lively trail-town is one settin' off at the edge of a good night-bedding area, where drivers can trade and wet their whistles and get a stove-cooked meal, whilst their herds rest a night. You drive *around*

the town—because you want the town to be there next year! But Carr and Dunseth, they're comin' through! And they don't aim to come peaceably! Well, I'll wait here until dark. A short gun's as good as a long one when there's no moon. Then—me and my cancer, we're going in!"

"I'll wait with you," the doctor said, and Buster gave him a sidewise look and grunted.

"Suit yourself!"

EVENTUALLY the five men withdrew, all but the outrider with the pinto. It seemed to the doctor that night would never fall, alhough the shadows had lengthened grotesquely by the time he encountered Buster.

They waited there and before night fell, three men appeared coming from town. Buster awaited them angrily. There was Jimmy Breedon, for one, and two local ranchers, Clyde Ferris and "Monk" Shuwalt.

"Howdy, Buster," Jimmy said. He answered the doctor's unspoken question with, "Denny's worried but restin'. There'll be more along directly. I deputized three more and told 'em to round up a posse. Old Denny'd have a fit but—"

"You—you deputized a posse?" Buster asked softly.

Jimmy nodded and Buster flared at him: "You had the gall to call a posse! Then Pa must be down sick! Or he never would of stood for it. He's always been the law here and he never had to call on anybody for help! There ain't been a citizen posse needed in Denny Craig's county since his first term. Jimmy, if you were half the age you are—"

Ferris Shuwalt gawked at the big deputy in amazement. He glared back.

"All right, if that's the way you want it!" He snarled. "You couldn't let well enough alone! You had to rush me! Well, I'm a man with a cancer and just right to be rushed! *Yippee!*"

He turned his horse suddenly and spurred it down the trail. The big animal, unused to the goad, laid his belly to the ground and ate up the trail. The man on the pinto had turned his back to haze a recalcitrant steer back to the herd, and not until he heard Buster's flying horse did he pull the rifle from his saddle boot—and then it was too late.

The doctor, too, was one who did not notice what he was doing until it was too late. He was less than two hundred yards behind Buster when it happened. The little pinto was built for cow work and not for this kind of range war. Buster's big gelding was admirably framed to carry his huge weight. Buster leaned over the saddle, whooped again, and drove the gelding straight at the pinto.

The man on the pinto tried a split second too long to get the rifle out. Then he flung himself from het saddle—but just as he shook his stirrups clear, Buster drove the two horses together.

The nimble little pinto tried to leap clear but his rider swung on the reins, handicapping him. Buster's gelding hit the pinto just behind the saddle.

The little horse was bowled over. He screamed, and the rider screamed as he went under the horse, and Buster veered off and let the reins hang slack a moment while his horse caught its balance. The doctor looked back and saw the three startled men regain their wits and pound after them.

Buster Craig was laughing now and he sat up in the saddle without apparent regard for the horrible growth that was eating away at his stomach. He whooped again as a gray horse shot into sight, threading its way up the valley floor between parting segments of the herd. He turned his horse and rode slowly down to meet the gray, holding up his hand.

"Halt, Carr!" he boomed. "Keep your distance and nothing will happen! Make one false move and I'll start that herd back for Texas faster than they came here."

Carr was a tall, wide-shouldered, gaunt man. He hesitated a moment and looked back at his restless cattle. Then he stopped.

"What do you want, cowboy?" came his harsh voice. "What happened to Ivan?"

"The feller on the calico?" Again Buster's taunting laugh rang out. "He had the fool judgment to try to get in my way. I'm the law here, Carr. I came out here to give you some orders."

Carr flinched at that. He rode forward a few paces.

"You came here lookin' for trouble," he said flatly. "Well, here you can have big portions of it."

A short, heavy-set man wearing a tall,

black sombrero came loping circularly toward them, keeping away from the restless herd. Buster twisted a quick cigaret with his left hand and lit it.

"Waited so you could hear this, too, Dunseth," he called, when the short man had ranged up beside Carr. "I'm the law here! These are your orders. You bed here tonight! Two of you—either Carr or Dunseth and one other man, but not both Carr and Dunseth—can come into town and buy victuals tonight. You can buy one quart of whiskey, no more. At four o'clock tomorrow you take the east fork around the town and I better not see any stragglers! You can agree to that right here and now or I'm starting you back toward the Rio!"

DUNSETH looked at him incredulously. The doctor heard gasps of astonishment from Breedon, Ferris and Shuwalt, who had ranged themselves up a few yards behind. Carr leaned over and said something in a low voice to Dunseth and Dunseth shook his head and made some rasping, high-pitched, angry response.

"Just for that," he called to Buster, "at four o'clock tomorrow mornin' I'm starting the herd right through your town—if me and the boys leave anything of it tonight."

Buster got down from his horse quickly and called out, "Would you mind comin' up a little closer to say that, within gunshot, say? I like to see a man's face when he makes me his brag. Or do you Texas fellers make terms from out of range?"

The taunt worked and Dunseth, with a throttled snarl of anger, handed the reins of his horse to Carr and jumped down. Carr got down too and held both horses with his left hand.

Dunseth and Buster began walking slowly toward each other, and over their heads, the doctor could see the herd being hazed southward. All of the riders were working now, pushing the wild longhorns together, moving them back.

Suddenly the herd began to mill slowly. It shaped into a circle and the riders whooped it on. It was the one manouever that could hold the longhorns here in the event of trouble. It was the first time the doctor had ever seen it and he found it hard to bring his eyes back to Buster and Dunseth.

They stopped so close together that a shiver ran up the doctor's back. Behind him the pinto limped away, shaking its jingling bridle, but its rider, the luckless Ivan, lay still, his neck oddly twisted.

A little whine of nervousness came from old Jim Breedon's nose. Jim Dunseth, on the ground, had the powerful trunk of a gorilla on short, bowed legs. He planted his feet wide apart, with his long arms just lifted a little at his side, his hands working. He seemed to lean forward as he stared at Buster.

Behind him, Earl Carr let go of the two horses and began shuffling slowly forward to his partner's side, one stiff step at a time. Like Dunseth he was tense with rage, but it was a well-controlled rage, and there was something strong and vicious and tigerishly rapacious in both men. Again came the whine from old Jimmy Breedon and this time it had a pitiful plea in it!

"No, Buster! No! They're killers! This is their game! No!"

Buster laughed and his big body twisted, to present its left to the two men, and Carr sidestepped three paces and pulled the heels of his open hands back to his belly.

"I won't repeat them orders," Buster said and the laugh was bubbling just back of his voice. "I'm a man with a cancer and I love to give orders. You two thought you could push old Denny Craig around. You came here looking for trouble. By rights, I ought to send you south—but I won't. I'd rather have the trouble. I don't *want* you to go away without trouble."

Dunseth said flatly, "Denny's cub I reckanize you now! The mama-raised kid who's skeered of his shadow. I don't take no orders from you, kid."

"Then, Dunseth," Buster said, tilting his big body forward, *"Why don't you do something about it?"*

THE doctor could ot have moved for a fortune. He knew what Jimmy Breedon meant by that whined warning. Jimmy knew he was looking at a new kind of man—the maniacal killer, the one with a burr in his brain, the breed that lived to kill and killed to live.

The doctor saw Dunseth's hand snake down. He saw Carr's gray eyes, alert as a snake's, and he saw Carr's fanned right hand flash toward his gun. The old mare

stumbled back as the big .45's thundered—a crashing, echoing tattoo that seemed endless. He saw Dunseth do a funny thing. The squat little Texan seemed to throw away the gun, but the doctor recognized a reflex action when he saw one, and he knew that Dunseth was a dead man.

Earl Carr's gun was spitting an orange funnel of flame into the gathering shadows when he dropped it. The last shot went into the ground two feet in front of him and the flames fired the short, dry grass. A little fire licked out and burned gaudily for a moment. Then Carr, with a horrible, moaning, *"Ah-h-h-h!"* fell forward. His body smothered the flames and a little wisp of smoke curled up beside him.

Buster slid the gun back into its holster and turned around painfully, hitching himself spasmodically to keep from falling. His left hand crept up to his side and gathered a handfull of blood-soaked shirt.

"K-killed them," he said, "and mebbe the cancer won't get me after all. I killed Dunseth and I killed Carr and I did it together, and I took Carr's lead and didn't let it knock me over! Oh, I thought I'd keel over there for a minute but I braced myself until I saw him fall and—"

He slumped down on his face. The doctor pulled his bag off the saddle horn and jumped down. He saw Jimmy Breedon spur ahead to meet two Carr-Dunseth riders. Jimmy's voice was harsh.

"You two! Keep yore distance and you won't be harmed. Now listen carefully to what I say. I want you to get back there and *hold that herd!* I'll have men here to take charge of it in less than an hour and if one of you leaves before then, I'll hunt you down if it takes the rest of my life. Whoever owns these cattle can have them, but I want them here when my men get here. Pass that word, *and hold thatherd!"*

The two, with an incredulous last look at Dunseth's and Carr's bodies, rode back obediently. Breedon delegated Ferris to watch from one side, Shuwalt from the other, until the possemen arrived. The old deputy was crisply authoritative until the two ranchers were out of hearing. Then he crumpled down on his knees beside the doctor, who had cut away Buster's shirt.

"How is he? How's old Denny's boy? Doc, old Denny will surely die from this!"

"No, he won't!" The doctor was curt because he was busy at something he knew and liked. "Denny's heart is good for a long time yet and Buster's just nicked in the side. Lost a little blood but he's got a constitution like a bull. He'll be on his feet in a week. Go tend to your cattle. I don't want my patient run over by a stampede."

Buster opened his eyes then.

"I'm—I'm not goin' to die?" His face clouded over. "I hoped I would. I don't want to live to let any cancer ketch up with me. Let her bleed, Doc! Let me go this way!"

Breedon shook his head and the doctor winked, and Breedon tiptoed away. The doctor sat down beside Buster. Not far away he could hear horses running, many of them. He had not much time, because if he knew old Denny Craig, he'd be at the head of this posse. . . .

"You'll be all right, Buster," he said. "If I were you, I'd kind of get over this cancer a little at a time. A man isn't supposed to get well very fast. Suppose you have another attack—not quite so bad—in about a week or two. Then a month from now, let's have another one. That way folks won't get wise. About the only thing that *would* kill your dad would be the truth."

"The—the truth?"

"Yes." The horses were closer. "You didn't have cancer, Buster. You were just scared stiff. Sure you had pains in your stomach! Nerves, because you were scared. You've got plenty of courage but you've always been a little in awe of your dad. Now you know you're as good as he is and you needn't ever worry again! It was pretty brutal treatment but I was thinking of old Denny's weak heart. And by the way, Buster, those weren't morphine tablets. They were peppermint and soda. Good for a nervous stomach, useless for cancer. Remember—recover from it slowly for Denny's sake."

The posse hammered up, fanned out, circled the herd as the Carr-Dunseth men fled southward in panic. Old Denny Craig came over and looked down at his son and the starlight twinkled dully on his worn star. The doctor walked away and caught his old mare and rubbed her nose pensively, taking care not to look at the two Craigs.

"It worked, horse," he whispered, "but do you know—I could have been shot here!"

He fainted.

Charlie's trusting ways made it simple for these two outlaws to make a startling getaway and near impossible for the sheriff to round up the owlhoot critters—especially when it was evident that Charlie was part of a

Coyote Credit-Trap

Charlie said dryly, "This here six-gun is primed for trouble, ya can be sure!"

ILLUSTRATED BY A. W. KIEMLE

By WILLIAM J. GLYNN

IN LONETREE, folks said Charlie Taylor would give you the shirt off his bony old back. The homesteaders crowding in on the range went them one better. In the pocket of the shirt, they said, you would most likely find a five-dollar bill, or an order for groceries at his general store.

When confronted with profuse or stammered thanks for his unfailing generosity, Charlie would cross his long legs and bite down hard on the chew of Apple plug bulging his leathery cheek. Sometimes he would smile and his homely, good-natured face would wrinkle like a relief map of Mon-

tana! Always his small brown eyes would twinkle as if the whole thing was a huge joke.

But Charlie Taylor was no easy-mark.

"I have my reasons for helpin' folks," he told Sheriff Jim Buckridge. "It's right—and it's good business."

The two old cronies were sitting out in front of the store, that warm Spring morning, watching Lonetree awake and rub the sleep from its eyes.

"Now you take those two gun-hung strangers coming down street," Charlie went on. "Don't those poor fellows look mighty hungry and mad at the world? Right away I can't help feeling sorry for them. I've been in their boots. It's plenty tough."

After a careful scrutiny of the two strange riders, Jim Buckridge said, "Shore, they look all you said and then some. But what's that got to do with you trusting everybody like a long lost brother? You ain't rich, Charlie. Remember that settler, I forget his name, who beat you out of four months' supplies a while back? Lived up Antelope Creek if I remember rightly."

"Yes," Charlie said. "But that's only one. Most folks are honest down under the hide. I test 'em pretty well before I let any of them have credit."

"Oh, shore." The sheriff scoffed. "You're feeding most of the cats and dogs in town, and too dang many of the citizens." Jim was slow-moving, heavy and big-boned, getting paunchy, in his sixties, and not worrying about it. But his cool gray eyes were alert, watching the two riders.

He let his Congress chair tilt forward and rap the boardwalk.

"Just look at them," Charlie said, pity in his voice. "Plumb starved. Their horses look tired out, too. I'll bet a plug of chewing they turn in here and ask for food."

Jim snorted disgustedly. "I don't bet on a shore thing. Of course they're turning in for a hand-out. Your easy-going rep has spread the county. If you ask me, I'd say those two hard-jaw owls could stand a close questioning. Might be they're the bad ones been raiding and robbing the settlers east of us."

"Now, Jim," Charlie soothed. "I'm no fool. You let me handle this."

Buckridge grunted and his heavy jowls quivered with a quick anger at the old storeman. "Yeah," he drawled sarcastically, "you'll give them food, and cartridges for them cutters dragging their hips. That dang big heart of yours is a menace to my law job."

Charlie smiled broadly and he got out of his chair as the two riders slipped from leather at the hitchrail and rolled their spur chains across the boardwalk.

"Howdy, boys," Charlie greeted them. "Something you want?"

THE tall, lathy stranger with the buffalo-hump nose nodded and hooked big thumbs in the shell belt about his flat stomach. He shot a keen glance at the staring old lawman. Then his bright green eyes stole quickly to his companion, a broad-shouldered young puncher, who looked to be in his early twenties, though it was hard to tell because of the grime and whiskers on his face.

"Better talk to the law, Shorty," the tall man said loudly. "I'll arrange for grub." He nodded again to Charlie and followed him into the coolness of the store.

Charlie led the way down the aisle, turned in behind the counter.

"You'll be wanting groceries," he said, and scratched at his scanty gray hair with the pencil stub he removed from behind a big flap ear.

The tall hombre leaned across the counter, a sly grin on his gaunt face.

"You read my mind, mister, but I'm short on cash. Me and my pardner, Shorty Reed, just homesteaded a piece of land north of here on Antelope Creek, up on the edge of the Pryor Mountains. I'm Chet Stryker. We heard about the government openin' some of that foothill land. So we crossed the Big Horn and filed yesterday at the county seat. Figure on raisin' us some beef, leasing gover'ment graze for summer range."

Charlie nodded gravely, his little eyes brushing over the stranger's worn, grimy clothing.

"Most of the settlers comin' in are farmers. We could use a cow outfit, though, seeing the—the big Lazy W pulled stakes when the land was opened to homesteaders."

Chet Stryker crammed a fistful of soda crackers into his mouth.

"I heard about them, about the Lazy W movin' out," he mumbled around the dry crackers. "That's why me and Shorty fig-

ured we'd start a cow ranch. Sell beef to the sodbusters, mebbe."

"If you really do that," Charlie said earnestly, "I could take a beef a week to keep my meat counter filled."

Stryker swallowed the crackers, reached out to the barrel and put another handful in his Levi pockets. "That's what I calls a real welcome," he said, "getting an offer of grub, and a promise to buy beef."

"I didn't offer groceries free," Charlie said. "But if you'll pay—"

"Oh, sure, *sure*, old man," Stryker hurriedly assured him.

But Charlie had no smile. This man was not one to instill confidence. However, Charlie had never turned down a man in need. He went ahead, slowly but purposefully, and filled Chet Stryker's order. It was the usual thing: two sides of bacon, flour, Arbuckle coffee, a few cans of salmon and tomatoes. But his ears twitched when the tall stranger ordered cartridges for his Winchester saddle carbine and two full boxes of .45s for his six-shooters.

Charlie looked sharply at him. "Going to do a heap of shootin' aren't you?"

"Meat for the pot," Stryker told him curtly, and popped a dried prune into his mouth.

"You won't have much time for that, will you?" Charlie asked, turning the wheel of his big red Atlas coffee grinder. "Plenty work cut out for you, plowing enough grind to prove up on your claim, building—"

Stryker's hard green eyes narrowed a fraction. "I know what I'm a-doin'," he said. "You tend to the groceries."

"No harm meant," Charlie said quietly. He totaled the list then, giving one copy of the order to the cowman who brushed it to the floor without a glance.

Charlie sighed, picked up the bacon he had laid out. He smelled of it. "Not as fresh as some of the others I have," he said. "Picked it up by mistake." He went back to the meat rack, lifted two other sides from the hooks—fat bacon, shiny with dripping grease, pale from too short a time in the smokehouse.

"Now these are first class fat bacon," Charlie said.

Sryker glared at the old storeman, then his shoulders lifted in a shrug and he watched Charlie wrap the greasy bacon.

"Anything else?"

Chet's green eyes shuttled over the general store's wide variety of goods. "Reckon not." He pulled a folded piece of paper from his hip pocket and spread it out on the counter. "This'll prove we ain't trying to pull your leg. It's the filin' paper I got for my claim."

Charlie glanced briefly at it, noted the township and section location, the name. He said, "I had my leg pulled before—and you say you're Chester Stryker, huh?"

"Chet, to my friends." The cowman was loading his six-shooter from one of the boxes of .45s.

"All right, Chester," Charlie said, and the two men stowed the groceries in a couple of empty oat sacks. Outside, they tied them on the horses. Charlie was just running a hand down over the roan's newly vented brand, when Shorty Reed lunged up from the chair beside old Jim Buckridge and, leaping down into the street, brushed Charlie aside and mounted.

"You keep yore hands to yourself!" Shorty growled. "My horse don't like strangers fooling around." He climbed into his saddle and set in the hooks, and both riders whirled out into the street.

SHERIFF Jim hadn't missed a trick, and now he was on his feet, glaring at old Charlie as the storeman returned to the walk.

"You—you old fool," Jim spluttered. "You sold those outlaws loads for their guns! I seen you. Don't deny it!"

Charlie grinned. "Won't do any harm."

"Harm?" Jim yelled. "Why, you easy-going, chicken-hearted old moss-horn!" he roared. "Do you know that Shorty Reed feller sat right there in that chair beside me with a sixgun boring into my shortribs all the time you was in that dang store? And while you were lookin' over his horse and helping on that free food you gave them, the tall one was looking down the barrel of a cocked six-shooter—right at me!"

"They wouldn't have hurt you," Charlie said quietly. "You should have—"

"They'd of killed me! That isn't all. This town'll have my star for what you just done, Charlie Taylor."

"You haven't a thing on 'em, really."

Jim didn't answer that. He couldn't. The hot blood was crowding his throat and neck.

"You and your blasted trusting ways," he finally got out. "I never seen two fellows look more owlhoot in my life. And you let them get away!"

Charlie bit off a new chew and offered the plug.

"Here, sit down and cool off, Jim. You've got to watch or you'll bust a blood vessel one of these days, losin' your temper like that."

Both men were startled out of their argument by the sudden drum of hoofs coming in from the other end of town. It was tow-headed Henry Jenson, coming on a run, sliding his big plow horse to a stop in front of the fuming sheriff.

"Jim!" Henry shouted, and leaped from the black's bare wet back. "You see a couple gents come through here? Cow-hands they looked like!"

Buckridge stepped up to the settler. "Tall feller and a short, sawed-off little jasper with a week's crop of whiskers?"

"Them's the ones." Jenson panted. "Came down along the creek, they did! Stopped at my place. I seen them from the field where I was seeding flax. Those coyotes rifled my shanty—stole my savin's from the sugar can, then they set fire to the place! I came on the run, ridin' the mate to this here black. But they shot old Pete right out from under me and took off in a cloud of dust! I had to ride into town on this old plug. I'm a citizen, Jim! You gotta do something—quick. I—"

"They came down Antelope creek?" Charlie asked.

"Sure."

"Might be they were holed up in that abandoned claim shack up there."

"I don't know, Charlie, but somethin's got to be done."

Jim whirled on Taylor. "Now see what you done. I ought to hold you as an—an accomplice," he blustered.

CHARLIE'S grin was lop-sided with the big chew of Apple plug.

"Reckon not," he said dryly. "You sat right there and saw me give them the groceries. You haven't proof they're outlaws."

"Proof?" roared the lawman. "Taylor, you're obstructin' law and justice!" He wheeled to Jenson. "Come on, we'll get us a posse of loyal town folks. And you, Charlie Taylor, can sit right here in the shade and chew your damn tobacco!" He flung the last remark over a thick shoulder as he stamped up street.

It was a half hour later when Charlie saw the Lonetree posse collect in front of the livery barn and start off. Jenson pointed at Charlie, as the posse rode past the store, and from the black looks some of the possemen threw his way, the old storeman knew the settler and sheriff had been telling how he let the outlaws get away, had given them food and even sold them cartridges for their guns.

"And me feeding most of the posse," Charlie muttered. He patted the old town dog curled up on the walk and watched until the posse had vanished down the road. Then he sauntered across the street to the livery barn next to O'Brien's feed store.

He hired a buckboard and team from the hostler and helped him hitch up.

"Now, Len," Charlie said to the liveryman, "this isn't in your line but I'd like to rent or borrow that six-shooter slapping your hip."

Len Linderman yawned and rubbed his rheumy eyes.

"You ain't aming to foller that posse?"

Taylor shook his head. "Won't be necessary."

Linderman shoved his tattered old J. B. back on his bold head. "You ain't never refused a man help, no matter what the sheriff just said about you. All right, Charlie," he added, and unbuckled his shell belt with gun and holster and handed them over. "But you better stick to groceries like I'm sticking to the barn. Hosses and grub —they don't talk back with a sixgun."

Charlie smiled at Len and chirped up his team of duns. Three miles from town he turned his horses off the road and headed for the little patch of timber in a ravine, the only real cover he had seen since leaving town. The posse had gone on, as he made sure by getting down and studying the tracks in the dust. Heading for the Pryors, he figured. But that didn't stop him from following his own idea as to where he might find hungry outlaws.

He dipped down toward the cottonwoods, his eyes searching for Stryker or Shorty Reed. He had Linderman's six out of leather cocked and in his hand, ready for trouble. He drove on toward the trees, not stopping

until he caught the unmistakable odor of coffee and frying bacon.

Rounding a patch of sandcherry, he drove right up on the two strangers, hunkered down in front of a small cook fire.

They had their backs to Charlie, wolfing down a bait of hastily cooked food, watching the road up north near the mountains, where they'd seen the posse go by, hell for leather. They didn't hear Charlie until he stopped his team and eased himself out of the rig. He walked to within twenty feet of them and stopped.

He coughed and Chet Stryker leaped erect, whirling on his toes and drawing his six-shooter all in one gun-swift movement. Shorty Reed dropped his tin plate and went to a knee, grabbing for his .45.

"No need diggin' for hardware," Charlie said dryly. "This here sixgun is prime for trouble and the posse will be coming directly, soon as they find out they've been following a cold trail."

Stryker snarled and jerked his trigger. The gun clicked. And Shorty's hammer dropped—on a click. Chet's bony face twisted, his jaws working at a mouthful of food.

"This gun—it won't shoot!" Chet whispered.

"Mine neither!" Shorty mumbled, looking stupidly at his .45.

"Of course they won't," Charlie said. "They're loaded with sand. Re-fills. Duds. Drop 'em, boys, and finish your meal. I hear that old Jim Buckridge doesn't feed any too well in his jailhouse."

Stryker cursed and made a lunge at old Charlie.

But the storeman was ready for him and triggered, sending lead slicing through the air, tearing the Stetson from the tall outlaw's head.

"Don't rile me, boys," Charlie warned. "I've never killed a man and don't want to. Especially one that owes me money. But don't press me or this dadgum thing might shoot straight."

Stryker drew back, his face pale, staring at Charlie's smoking six-shooter.

"Why-why'd you give me them blank loads?"

Taylor chuckled. "For a couple of reasons, buster," he said. "First, you said you knew all about the Lazy W. There never was an outfit with that brand around here. That was just a little windy, a coyote credit trap, you might say. Then, when I saw your belts were empty, back there in the store, I figured your guns were, too. You proved that by loading your six as soon as you got your hands on that box of .45s. You see, I keep those blanks for fellows like you and some of the young bucks of Lonetree that hanker to shoot up things once in a while. Those dud cartridges cool them off."

JIM Buckridge and the posse were on the way now. Charlie could hear them clattering down from the road, and held his gun on the two outlaws.

The posse thundered up to the little camp, old Jim in the lead, puffing and blowing at the unaccustomed exercise. But he quickly sized up the situation and inside of two minutes had both outlaws handcuffed and loaded into Charlie's buckboard.

"Well, Charlie," Jim snapped, "you shore enough pulled a slick one, giving them hoots blanks, but how in time did you know where to find them? We been clear to the Pryors with nary a trace!"

Charlie bit off a good chew and passed his plug around the circle of gaping possemen.

"I'll tell you how, lawdog," Stryker broke in savagely. "That old moss-back was wise all the time! He—"

"Quiet, you dang coyote!" Jim roared.

Charlie laughed briefly. "Well, these boys can tell you. The slim one tried to palm off Chester Stryker's name and claim papers. Must have found them in Chester's shanty up the creek. But he isn't much of a forger. I saw where he changed the dates of filing. And I knew Chester Stryker well. He was the only dead-beat ever to run up much of a bill with me. He pulled out of this country a while back and I never forgot his mean face." He grinned at the glowering outlaw. "And he didn't call himself 'Chet' as you were so careful to tell me, boy."

Shorty Reed grunted sourly and dropped his head on his chest.

"I told you it wouldn't work," he mumbled to his pard.

The sheriff said, "Yeah, but I still don't understand why you let them get away, knowing they were owlhoots, Charlie. When they first come up they didn't show you the claim papers. The tall one didn't tell you his name until you'd started to fill out

(*Continued on page* 75)

VALLEY CLEAN-UP

Illustrated By AL SAVITTS

Putting words on paper was new to Speck Spalding but he had inherited the job of letting the citizens of Candle Valley know that now was the time to fight against a lawless bunch

THE people of Candle Springs watched Speck Spalding ride into town, and reckoned that he wouldn't stay hitched to the *Candle Spring News*, which his Uncle Tribble had left him, any longer'n it would take him to sell out. Speck Spalding wasn't a hand to stay put any place very long at a time.

Speck rode up to the shambly newspaper building, unhooked big feet from the stirrups and slid to the ground. A long-barreled Colt slapped against his lean thigh, and some of his rusty hair got out from under his ten-gallon hat. He pulled up his pants, tucked in his shirt tail and strode into the newspaper office.

By BEN FRANK

Speck felt the bullet burn his lean ribs. He let the outlaw have it then, as the other man floundered by the wall, cursing hard in pain.

Old Inky Ingold, the printer, gave him a toothless grin and said, "Been lookin' for you for a week."

Speck grinned at Inky and folded himself up in his uncle's old swivel chair behind the editor's desk.

"I ain't one to be rushed," he murmured.

Inky knew that. His rheumy eyes fixed on the young brown face with the twinkling blue eyes set well apart on either side of a lean, sun-burned nose.

"The paper's supposed to go out tomorrow," Inky said.

"Yuh been getting it out for twenty years," Speck said.

"I get it out." Inky nodded. "But your Uncle Tribble did the writin'. I haven't got a line for the editorial page."

Speck put his big feet on the desk and rolled a quirly.

"Fill her up with comics, or somethin'." He got the cigarette going and then his blue eyes narrowed behind the cloud of smoke. "Inky, just what happened to my Uncle Tribble?"

"Accordin' to Doc Toft, seems your uncle had a few too many drinks an' his old ticker quit ticking."

Speck took another drag on the cigarette.

"Never knew Uncle Tribble was a drinkin' man," he murmured.

Inky shrugged again. "He wasn't. I guess that's why them few drinks did him in."

The printer went through a narrow door into the press room and Speck picked up an issue of the *Candle Springs News*. It was the last one his uncle had put out. The new owner turned unhurriedly to the editorial page and a headline caught his attention.

"LET'S CLEAN UP CANDLE SPRINGS!" he read.

He finished the article and folded the paper, thoughtfully. So his uncle had been fighting Sid Switzer, gambler and owner of the Oasis Saloon. "Why," his uncle had written, "must we, the citizens of the place we have chosen for our home, stand by and see rottenness eat the heart out of our town?" There was more to it—something about cattle-rustling and the small cattle men being forced to sell out.

Speck knew something of Sid Switzer and the things he knew weren't to the man's credit. Speck rolled another cigarette and frowned at the littered desk. He'd never run from a fight in his life. Maybe here was a—

The office door squealed open and a tall, well-dressed stranger stepped into the room. He took a derby hat from his bald head and smiled with a pair of thick, pale lips.

"Mr. Spalding, I believe?" he said.

Speck nodded and held a flame to the cigarette.

"I'm Elton Pelley," the stranger went on. "A newspaper man. I heard in a roundabout way that this paper would be for sale. I've come prepared to make you an offer for it."

He named a price that made Speck sit up and take notice. Speck had an impulse to yell, "Brother, it's yours, lock, stock and barrel!" But he grinned and ran long fingers through his sandy hair, and said, "I ain't the kind to be rushed into anything, mister. You come around in a couple of days an' by then I ought to have my mind made up."

Pelley went out, and Speck followed him with his eyes. He saw the man cross over and go into Sid Switzer's Oasis. It could be, Speck reckoned, that Mr. Pelley was thirsty. Or again it could be something else.

SPECK moved over to the press-room door.

"Inky!" he called. "Who's Elton Pelley?"

"Never heard of him," Inky answered.

Still puzzled, Speck put on his big hat and stepped out into the bright sunlight. His eyes swept up and down the street. Not a bad town. Some nice homes here and there. A good school. A tall, white church. But there was one blot, he knew. Sid Switzer's Oasis.

Speck led his saddle horse to the livery barn and found his old friend, Ed Hansen, running it.

The old man tugged at his handle-bar mustache and held out his horny hand.

"Thought yuh was ranching," Speck said in some surprise.

"I was," Hansen answered, bitterness in his voice. "But I wasn't big enough to stand my losses. Boy, Candle Valley is bein' hit hard by rustlers."

Speck began to build a cigarette. "Rustlers?"

The old man nodded. "Don't ask me who they are, for I don't know. Nobody seems to know. They just sweep down outa the hills, and zingo—you've lost another herd!"

After a time Speck went back into the street. He reckoned he was about ready to get caught up with what was going on in

and around his old home town. The Oasis seemed the most likely place for that, so he headed that way.

A girl came out of Tom Hinkle's grocery store. She was tall and slim with soft light brown hair that looked a little red in the sun. She turned and stared at Speck and he stared right back at her. She was Maude Hansen, old man Hansen's daughter, and had grown up in the last few years since he'd seen her.

"Speck Spalding!" she called, and held her hand toward him.

He grinned and took her fingers in his own. She was pretty enough to make any man look twice. And then Speck saw something that made him blink. She was wearing a glittering horseshoe-shaped pin that he'd won one night in a poker game. He'd given it to her because she was such a nice kid and seemed to want the trinket.

She saw that he was looking at the pin, and colored faintly.

"Well," she said, "why shouldn't I wear it? It's pretty!"

"What's gone wrong with Candle Springs?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Everything," she answered soberly. "Switzer's Oasis has got out of hand. It's like a rotten apple in a basket of good apples. It's even reached out until its rottenness seems to have moved into the open range."

"Yuh mean Switzer's got something to do with this cattle-rustlin'?"

She shook her head. "No one knows for sure—but birds of a feather—"

"My Uncle Tribble was fightin' Switzer in his paper."

Her eyes narrowed. "Did it ever occur to you that your uncle might not have had a heart attack?"

Speck stared at her. "Go on!" he said harshly.

"There's nothing more to say," she said quietly. "Except Dr. Toft spends a lot of his time in the Oasis. He's the doctor who examined your uncle and pronounced it heart failure."

A FEW minutes later, Speck hurried across the street to the newspaper office and found Inky Ingold staring at a crumpled sheet of paper.

Inky handed the paper to Speck without a word.

Speck read, "Spalding, if you're smart, you'll sell out and get out. Only a fool like old man Tribble would try to stir up trouble in Candle Valley." The note was unsigned.

"Where'd yuh get this?" Speck demanded.

"On your desk," Inky answered. "Thought I heard a noise in here. Came in just as the back door shut. Too many weeds in the alley to see anyone. Whoever it was left that note."

Speck's blue eyes turned hard.

"This oughta look good on the editorial page," he said tightly. "Print it in big capital letters, Inky. Say under it that the new editor, that's me, will carry on where his Uncle Tribble left off. You can say, also, that I'm in a cleanin'-up mood and that the *Candle Springs News* is standin' for law and order, same as it always has!"

Inky suddenly paled.

"You're the boss," he said hoarsely, and turned and stumbled into the press room.

"Inky!" Speck called. "Is any of that whiskey my uncle had his last drink of around here any place?"

"The bottle's in the second drawer of the desk where I hid it," Inky answered. "Ain't much left. I kept it—I don't know why—I guess 'cause everyone seemed to want it."

Speck fished out the bottle. There was less than a thimbleful of the liquor left. He lifted the cork and sniffed. It smelled like whiskey. He replaced the cork and found a small box. He packed the bottle in the box, wrapped it in a sheet of newspaper and addressed the package to a doctor he knew in Denver. A few minutes later, he mailed the package along with a letter to the same doctor.

THAT week when the *Candle Spring News* came out, the people read it with a great deal of interest. Most of them were highly pleased. They reckoned that maybe they had been wrong about Speck Spalding. It looked as if he was going to stay put and follow old man Tribble's lead. Some of them even dropped into Speck's office and paid up their subscriptions. A few dropped a hint that they'd back him in cleaning up the town and valley.

Speck kept his ears and eyes open for some word from Sid Switzer. The first of the week, he even went into the Oasis and

had a glass of beer just to see what would happen. Switzer, a tall, slim-shouldered man with dark skin, black hair and snaky eyes, came up to him at the bar.

"Have another drink on the house," Switzer offered.

"Thanks," Speck returned. "Ain't no hand to drink more than one glass at a time."

A bulge under Switzer's long black coat suggested a hidden sixgun. The man's long fingers toyed with a glittering gold watch chain, and a crooked smile played at his thin lips. He started to say something, changed his mind and walked to a table in the back of the room.

Speck unhurriedly finished the beer. As he turned toward the batwing, Elton Pelley came in.

"Just the man I'm looking for." Pelley smiled. "Decided to sell me your paper, Spalding?"

"Sorry," Speck said. "It ain't for sale."

"Every man has his price. What's yours?"

"You couldn't pay it," Speck said dryly and shouldered past the man.

When he went into the newspaper office, he found old Inky Ingold waiting for him, his face ashy white.

"Speck," Inky said hoarsely, "you'll have to find a new printer. I'm quittin'."

Speck stared at the man. "The hell you are!"

Inky nodded. His eyes had a sick look in them.

"I ain't afraid for myself, Speck, but I have a daughter an' two grandchildren to think about."

"I don't get it." Speck said. "What's wrong?"

"Somebody's left another note. This time for me. It said if I helped you get out another paper, somethin' would happen to one or both of my grandchildren."

"We'll tell the sheriff about this!" Speck said angrily.

Inky shook his head. "Sheriff Atkins is an old man. He don't get around much. As I said, I ain't afraid for myself but I'm not runnin' any chances for one of the kids."

He turned and walked heavily through the front door.

For a moment Speck stood staring angrily after the oldster. Then a slow grin came to his face. He went outside, locked the door carefully and headed for the depot. At the depot he sent a telegram, which said, "Johny Fay, if you still like a scrap, come to Candle Springs pronto. Speck."

On the way back, Speck stopped at the post office. There was a letter postmarked Denver, Colo. He opened it.

"Dear Speck," he read. "That sample of whiskey had strychnine in it. An overdose would certainly kill your uncle."

THERE was more to the letter but that was enough to send Speck hurrying into the sheriff's office.

Sheriff Atkins lifted his white head and nodded a greeting.

"Anything I can do for yuh, son?"

Speck handed him the letter and the old sheriff read it twice.

"I reckon I'll have a talk with Doc Toft," he said.

He tramped to an open door and called, "Jip, come here."

A hawk-faced man stepped into the room, a deputy's badge pinned to his soiled blue shirt. His pale, shifty eyes washed over Speck Spalding. They were without expression.

"Get hold of Doc Toft an' bring him here!" Atkins ordered. The deputy slouched out and Speck asked. "Who's your deputy, sheriff?"

Atkins frowned. "Jip Beeler. Come here about a year ago. Hired him 'cause nobody else in the valley would take the job. Seems as though men with families don't hanker to be a lawman here any more. Reckon yuh can't blame them, with these night riders on the loose."

The sheriff shook his white head. "If I hadn't been so hard pressed for a man, I wouldn't've took Jip on. But I don't have any complaint against him. He's a hard-working man. Doesn't kick a bit when I keep him out all night, tryin' to spot those hombres who've been runnin' cattle out of the valley." The old man sighed heavily. "I ain't so young as I used to be, Speck. Riding a hoss gets me down."

When Speck left the office, he realized that the law of Candle Valley was no longer in Sheriff Atkins' hands. It had been turned over to a newcomer and the newcomer had a shifty look in his eyes.

When Speck got back to his newspaper office, he found a yellow telegram shoved under the locked door. He tore it open. It

was from Johnny Fay and it read, "Dear Speck, Am on my way. Johnny."

Speck went inside, flopped down on the swivel chair, dug out pencil and paper and set to work. He knew now that he would get out another issue of the *Candle Springs News,* for Johnny Fay, besides being a good hand with a rope and sixgun, had worked for years in old man Fay's printing office in Cheyenne.

Putting words on paper was something new to Speck Spalding. He made a dozen starts and tore up as many sheets of paper before he was satisfied with his opening lines.

But just as the sun turned red against the western horizon, he finished his first editorial. In it he made a demand for honest citizens of Candle Valley to band together for their own protection against the lawless element.

"Let's make this a safe place for honest people and their families to live in," he finished. "Let no man be afraid to fight for the right. Let's sort out the rotten apples and chuck them into the fire so the good ones won't spoil."

He was reading the article a second time and feeling downright pleased with it when the front door burst open. He turned and looked up into Maudie Hansen's white face.

"Speck," she said huskily, "Sheriff Atkins is dead! He fell in his office and struck his head against the corner of the safe. Jip Beeler found him. Dead! Dr. Toft made the examination. He said he died because of a fractured skull."

"So there's been another so-called accident," Speck said bitterly. "That is, according to Doc Toft."

Maudie nodded. Something caught the light and glittered. It was the horseshoe pin.

"He was a nice old man," she said unhappily.

Speck said nothing but he knew that Atkins' death was no more accidental than his uncle's death had been.

"Too bad," he said.

"It's worse than that," Maudie said tonelessly. "Now Candle Valley is without honest law."

She walked out into the sunset, her head down, her slim shoulders sagging.

SPECK stared after her, thinking that someone hadn't wanted Sheriff Atkins to question Doc Toft about the poisoned whiskey. That meant that someone had tipped this person off about why Atkins wanted to talk to the medico. The only person who could have done that was the deputy, Jip Beeler. That meant that Beeler was tied in with the lawless element. Doc Toft, Maudie had said, spent a lot of time at the Oasis. The Oasis was the rotten apple of Candle Springs, and Sid Switzer was the core of the Oasis.

That night Speck slept in the office on some old blankets. He slept with his sixgun clutched in his fingers.

Johnny Fay arrived the next afternoon. He was a thin, quick-moving youngster with yellow hair and a lean jaw.

"Where's this scrap yuh mentioned?" he drawled.

Speck gave him a wide grin. He'd saved Johnny's life in a stampede one time and knew that the homely-faced hombre would do anything to help him out of a bad spot.

He pointed toward the press-room door.

"The scrap's in there," he said. "We got to print a paper."

Johnny flexed his long, supple fingers and grinned.

"I ain't set a stick of type since I run away from home, but I reckon I ain't forgot how."

He shrugged out of his jacket, loosened his gunbelt and legged it into the press room. Speck followed him.

"Not a bad set-up," Johnny observed. "Well, give me the stuff to print an' I'll print it."

As they worked, Speck gave him the low-down on the trouble in Candle Springs and the valley.

Johnny's grin grew wider and the blue of his eyes deepened.

"Sounds like we might have some fun," he said when Speck had finished. "I haven't been in a good scrap since that time me and yuh got pie-eyed in that joint in Casper."

That week when the people of the valley read the *Candle Springs News,* they shook their heads. Speck Spalding, they allowed, was sure sticking his neck out. The paper called for a special election to replace old Tom Atkins as sheriff.

"Why turn our law enforcement over to

a man who's a newcomer? A man we don't know much about?" Speck had written.

The editorial set tongues to wagging and people to thinking. Some of the braver men met secretly and talked over plans for forming a vigilance committee.

Speck Spalding and Johnny Fay guarded the newspaper building as if it were a bank without a vault. One of them stayed on the job all the time. They slept in the place at nights, their guns always ready. They expected trouble and were ready for it. However, nothing happened.

Johnny was disappointed. "What's the matter with them sidewinders?" he asked. "Are they going to let us go merrily on, making the people so mad that they'll organize an' clean house?"

Speck shook his sandy head. He was puzzled, too, at the surprising calm.

"Maybe they're waitin' for us to go to sleep on the job," he said. "Things are just too quiet, Johnny."

He flopped down on the swivel chair and began to think up what he would he would write for next week's paper. He reckoned he'd keep pounding away for a special election. Maybe he'd even suggest that they get up a petition to close the Oasis. That was it. He'd suggest that the Oasis was the first rotten apple to be thrown out of the basket.

THAT evening he left Johnny to guard the paper while he went to see Maudie Hansen. She was as pretty as a picture, with the lamp light gleaming on her soft brown hair. And again she wore the glittering horseshoe pin. But her hazel eyes were full of worry.

"You should be careful about going around at night alone," she said. "You're stepping pretty hard on some people's toes."

He grinned and patted the long-barreled Colt.

"I've stepped on people's toes before. I reckon I can take care of myself."

Before he left her, he kissed her goodnight. It worked out fine and she didn't seem to mind a bit. On the way back to the newspaper, he reckoned that maybe his wandering days were over. In fact he guessed he had a knack for running a newspaper and that he'd likely settle down and become a family man. Of course that would depend on the way Maudie felt about it. But he knew he wouldn't put the question until things had been straightened out in Candle Springs. The way it was now, the town certainly was no place to raise a family.

He walked along the middle of the street, keeping a sharp lookout for bushwhackers. Nothing happened. When he came to the Oasis, he decided suddenly to have a beer and take a bottle back for Johnny. In the back of his mind, too, lay a desire to see how Sid Switzer was reacting to the blasting he was getting in the *Candle Springs News*.

He stepped through the batwing and his eyes swept over the smoke-filled room. Switzer and Jip Beeler sat at a back table, drinking.

"Birds of a feather," Speck thought as he angled up to the long bar. He began shaping a cigarette.

His eyes lifted and he spotted paunchy Doc Toft sitting with his chair tipped back against the wall. Doc seemed to be snoozing under the brim of his pulled-down felt hat but Speck had a feeling that the medico wasn't missing a trick.

Just as the barkeep poured the drink, Elton Pelley sidled up to Speck, put one polished shoe on the brass rail, and said, "Quite a news-sheet you're turning out, fella."

"Ain't bad for a beginner, I guess," Speck said coolly.

Pelley laughed. "Where'd you learn your grammar?"

"Picked it up here an' there on the range," Speck returned quietly. "Maybe it isn't as good as school grammar but it's the kind that people around here can understand."

He finished the beer. Something prompted him to turn around. He saw that Switzer and Beeler no longer sat at the table. His eyes jumped to the wall. Doc Toft's chair was empty.

"Have a beer on me," Pelley offered smoothly.

A cold hand seemed to slide along Speck's spine. He shoved the man out of the way and ran to the batwing.

Outside he stared into the darkness. A spray of chill night wind tugged at his hat. He shivered. Everything was too quiet. Then a gun shot smashed the hush. On top

of the blast came a tinkle of glass and the light in Speck's office window blinked out.

HEART pounding, he raced for the building. He fumbled at the locked door, got it open. Ducking low, he struck a match. The red flare lit up Johnny Fay's face. The yellow-head lay sprawled by the desk, blood oozing from his head. The match went out and Speck found an unbroken lamp and got it going.

Johnny opened his blue eyes. For a moment he stared blankly up at Speck. Then a slow grin spread over his homely face. He lifted a hand to his head. It came away bloody.

"That was close," he mumbled.

The door opened, letting in a blast of air, making the lamp flicker. Doc Toft stepped inside and closed the door. He carried his black bag in his hand.

"Heard a shot." He puffed. "Figured somebody might need me. Saw your light go on in here and—"

His eyes fixed on Johnny's bloody face. He dropped down beside the youngster and fumbled at the catch on the black bag.

"An inch lower—" he began.

Johnny propped himself up on his elbows and tried to shake the dizziness out of his head. His eyes moved to the window. He grinned slowly.

"Sure didn't make much of a hole in the window," he said. "Not half as big as the hole in my head feels."

"You just got a scratch." Doc Toft grinned. His hand came out of the bag with a bottle of whiskey. "All you need is a good shot of this."

He found a glass, poured two fingers into it and set the bottle on Speck's desk. "Here you are," he said.

Johnny reached eagerly for the glass, started to raise it to his lips. Speck leaped forward, caught his arm and took the glass away from him.

"Thunder!" Johnny exploded. "What's the idea of—"

Speck turned fiercely on the medico.

"Here yuh are, Doc," he said in a hard, flat voice. "Age before beauty, you know."

Doc Toft sucked in a sharp breath and shook his head.

"Never touch the stuff. My liver can't stand a—"

Speck's big Colt seemed to leap into his brown hand. The black muzzle centered on the doctor's paunchy middle.

"I reckon that ain't enough to hurt your liver," Speck ground out. "Drink it, Doc!"

Toft took the glass. His hand shook and his eyes had a wild look in them. Suddenly the glass sliped from his fingers and crashed to the floor.

"Yuh can drink from the bottle," Speck said grittily. "But if you drop the bottle, I'll—"

The door swung open again and Jip Beeler stepped into the room. The lawman's badge gelamed brightly on his shirt.

"What's a goin'—" His eyes fixed on Johnny's gun. "Put that up," he roared, "or I'll throw you in—"

Sixgun held steadily, Speck backed against the wall.

"Yuh and who else!" he gritted. "Doc, take your drink!"

The doctor turned terrified eyes on the sheriff. "He's trying to make me drink some whiskey," he bleated. "I can't drink on account of my liver. Everybody knows ——"

Suddenly Jip Beeler reeled against the desk. The whiskey bottle upset, rolled to the floor and broke into a thousand glittering pieces. The amber fluid ran across the pine floor and seeped down between the cracks.

SPECK laughed hoarsely but there wasn't any mirth in it.

"Yuh win, Doc," he said. "Get out of here—both of you!"

"Yuh can't tell me—" Beeler began

A look on Doc Toft's face shut him up. Both Beeler and the medico hurried out through the door without another word.

Johnny grinned and staggered to his feet.

"I reckon I was wrong about one thing," Speck said. "Toft evidently didn't know after all that I knew about the strychnine in that whiskey he fed Uncle Tribble, or he wouldn't have tried the same trick again."

"Yuh mean—"

"Yeah," Speck said quietly. "Johnny, the hombre that shot at you wanted to know for sure if he did a good job of it, so he sent Toft to find out. I reckon Toft had his orders to finish yuh off with a drink if there was any finishing to be done.

There an't no way proving it, but I'd guess that whiskey was poisoned."

Johnny shuddered slightly.

"I shoulda thought of that myself," he growled. Then, grinning, "Well, it looks as though things are pickin' up."

"From now on," Speck told him, "when yuh light a lamp, keep the shades pulled down."

They were working on the next issue of the paper the following morning when Speck gave Johnny a sudden sour grin.

"Hold everything," he said. "I just had a brain storm."

Johnny wiped an ink-smeared hand over his nose.

"Yeah?"

"It's time we forced a show-down. Ain't no use fooling around about it. Unlock that front page form an' make room for some headlines."

THE next day when people opened their papers, the first thing they saw was "Next week's paper will carry the names of the men behind the cattle-rustling in Candle Valley" in inch high type. Smaller type declared, "All information as to the identification of the lawless in the valley will be complete and ready for publication next week. Armed men will be ready to help clean up our county."

That afternoon Sheriff Jip Beeler came pounding into the *Candle Springs News* office with a paper in his big hands.

"What's this about armed men?" he demanded. "I'm the sheriff, an' if anybody does any cleaning up, I'm—"

Speck, ignoring the man, kept on with his work.

"Listen to me!" Beeler roared. "If you know who's doing this rustlin', spill it! You—"

His voice choked off. Johnny Fay, a bandage about his yellow-head, had appeared suddenly in the press-room doorway. His hand rested on the butt of a holstered sixgun. Looking into Johnny's glittering eyes. Beeler had no doubt about Johnny's ability and willingness to use that gun

Speck had shoved back from his desk. He'd pulled a drawer partly open and his right hand rested inside the drawer. Jip Beeler suddenly didn't like the setup. He wasn't sure what Speck Spalding had hold of in that drawer but he guessed it wasn't a lead pencil.

"Take it easy, Sheriff," Speck said quietly. "When the paper comes out next week, yuh'll have all the information. And yuh won't like it! Incidentally, I noticed the other day that you're about six months behind in your subscription."

Beeler snorted but kept his hand well away from his gun.

"Just stop sendin' me your paper," he growled.

"Yuh won't want to miss next week's."

The sheriff snorted again and stamped out of the office.

A satisfied grin filled Johnny's homely face.

"Well," he prophesied, "things are goin' to happen pronto, or I'm as nutty as a walnut tree."

"Brother—" Speck grinned. "You ain't nutty!"

The day before the *Candle Springs News* went to press, Speck stepped over to the post office for the morning mail. On the way back to his office, he met old Ed Hansen.

The oldster tugged at his handle-bar mustache and asked worriedly, "Seen anything of Maudie this mornin'?"

Speck shook his head. "Ain't seen her since I dropped in at your house last evening. Why?"

"I had to go down to the livery barn early this morning," Hansen answered. "When I went back home for breakfast, she was gone. It isn't like her to go away without leavin' a note."

Speck went on to the office. A knot of worry began to work around inside him. He dug into his mail just for something to do. Most of it was from people who agreed with his clean-up policy, but one letter was written in a pencil scrawl. He had seen that same writing once before and his blood ran cold.

He tore the envelope open and read the note: "Spalding, if you don't want anything to happen to Maudie Hansen, sell out and leave town today. We've got the girl in our hideout in the hills. You couldn't find her in a thousand years. So pack up and leave and we'll turn the girl loose."

Again there was no signature.

(*Continued on page* 76)

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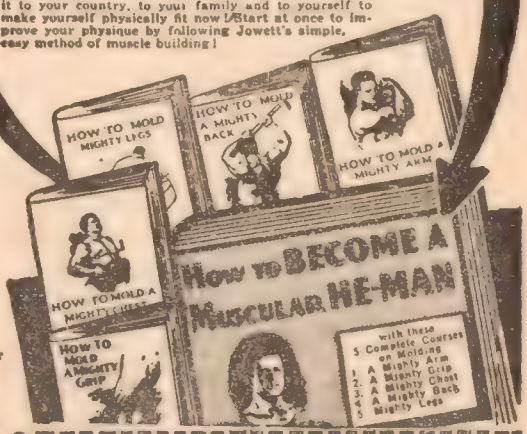
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(*Continued from page 21*)

STACEY called loudly, "You all set, Spud?" and Spud, for answer, opened fire with his hand gun. Stacey and the other hardcase joined in, and the three of them raked the brush with a savage volley.

Malone stretched out flat, a sweat of panic breaking out on him. Those slugs probed for him and shortly one or more would find him. He shoved the Henry ahead of him, dug his elbows into the snow, dragged himself forward. He worked forward for perhaps ten feet, coming to a flat boulder that he put between him and the man Spud. With his back thus covered, he lay prone and gripped the rifle. He fired at the gun flashes in the alders, then, on the third shot, twisted about and fired in Spud's direction.

They let up on their shooting, hugging their cover.

A nerve-twisting silence built up.

Malone could neither see nor hear any of the three. Despite the cold, the sweat kept oozing out on him. He toyed with the sour thought that Matt Brule's sending him to prison was to be preferred to this box-trap ambush, yet knew that if he had to do it over again he would have made the same choice. A man had to prove his innocence, even if it meant gambling with his life.

Finally George Stacey called out tauntingly, "Well, Malone, aren't you coming to get back your dust?"

Malone fired in the direction of the voice and heard Stacey swear.

Spud's gun blasted and Malone heard the slug hit the rock behind him and ricochet shriekingly. Then suddenly he heard something more—the crunching of crusted snow under a horse's hoofs. Spud heard it too and gave a warning yell. His gun roared but this time not in Malone's direction. He fired at the rider looming out of the darkness and that rider yelled and fired back at him—and Malone recognized the voice of Matt Brule.

Those two kept shooting at each other, and Malone, with his back now safe, rose and ran toward the alder thicket. The Henry roared again and again, and two figures began a hasty retreat through the trees. Malone saw one man go down, heard the agonized scream that started and then died in the hit man's throat. Malone was in among the trees now, and saw George Stacey swinging onto a horse.

Stacey would have made good his escape but for his catching up the halter rope of one of the two pack horses. It lost him precious seconds, but then, as Malone guessed, he didn't want to leave his loot behind. The thousands of dollars' worth of dust that had come from his bogus gold dealings was upon that pack animal.

Malone closed in on him, fired and saw Stacey's body jerk and twist convulsively. Something made him hold up his next shot. He watched Stacey, slowly sagging in the saddle, ride from the trees and start to ford the ice-laced creek. Stacey reached the far side before he fell from his mount, and when Malone crossed to him, he still gripped with a death grasp the halter rope of gold-burdened pack horse.

A rider broke through the trees, splashed into the stream. Malone whirled, throwing his Henry to his shoulder. But the rider was Matt Brule.

"He's dead?" Brule asked.

Malone nodded.

"They told me about him at Belle City," Brule said. "You should have waited for me. They blamed near did you in. It's good I did trail you, Malone."

"You're a bloodhound when it comes to manhunting, Matt."

"That's what I'm paid for. Well, we'll bury them as best we can," Matt Brule told him. "Then we'll take the outfit back to Belle. We'll have to divvy the gold up among the men Stacey swindled." He paused, gave Malone a curious look. "Which of us is going to tell the girl about Stacey's death?"

Malone was already wondering about that. But he knew that Hannah Warden had already been so badly hurt because of George Stacey, she would feel little pain over his death. Besides, she had spirit. And he, Dan Malone, would be able to make her forget. The look in Hannah's eyes the last time he saw her had convinced him of that.

He said, "Let's get at it, Matt." Malone was anxious to start back to Belle City, where the girl was waiting for him.

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SIX-GUN TALLY

(*Continued from page* 37)

Bud held his fire a moment as the deputy came on at a dead run. He could hear a horse pounding over beyond the house. Then Bud raised his sixgun, took deliberate aim and squeezed the trigger. Duncan stopped like a giant's hand had reached out and hit him. He reared up and backward on his heels, swayed like a hewn tree, then crashed to the ground. Bud turned to look at the big man who dropped from the saddle, to crouch beside him.

Then darkness closed over him like a great black cloud. . . .

When Bud opened his eyes again, he found himself in a bed, with his mother bending over him. Hardrock Wilson stood beside her, looking down at him. Sunlight was streaming in the window.

"Uh!" Bud grunted. "Wh-what happened?"

His mother smiled fleetingly, straightened up and moved to one side, and Hardrock stepped nearer.

"How you feeling, Bud?" the big man boomed.

"Not too bad," Bud answered, a weak grin twisting the corners of his mouth. "What happened after I passed out?"

"Nothin'," Hardrock said disgustedly. "It was about all over when I got there. You made a sixgun tally of the whole bunch and evened the score for old Bill Murdoc. I got one of them as I rode up, but you got the other two before I could get off the horse."

Bud lay still for a moment, eyes turned out the window. Then he looked back at Hardrock Wilson and his mother.

"Some things I'd like to get straightened out," he said. "Why'd you marry that skunk, Mother?"

"It was for your sake, Bud," she replied. "Now that Hugh Sorden is dead, I can tell you. He said if I didn't marry him, he'd get you hung. I—I didn't *want* to marry him. I did it to save you. Then—"

"An' then he framed me, anyway," Bud cut in, "for the shooting of old Judge Martin."

"Yeah, he sure did," Hardrock boomed, and Bud's mother nodded mutely. "Bill Murdoc wasn't a rustler like Sorden claimed! Sorden framed him, too, like he tried to frame you. I knew there was something wrong but your mother wouldn't tell me. I knew she wouldn't marry a man like Sorden, of her own free will, so I figured she was being forced into it. And whatever it was, it was scary enough to make her keep her mouth closed! So I didn't persist."

"You—you mean you wanted her to marry Sorden?" Bud asked.

"I certainly did not," Hardrock said indignantly. "But there wasn't nothin' I could do about it! She wouldn't tell me. Then here is another little thing. It didn't occur to me till just a while ago, when Mary an I was talking things over. She's now Hugh Sorden's widder—and as his widder, she inherits the Bar S! He hasn't any other heirs. The Bar S, combined with the Lazy M, would make her—and you—one whale of a big ranch! I was coming out here to settle things with Hugh Sorden, anyhow—but hell—you beat me to it, Bud."

"Why'd you let her marry the skunk, Hardrock?" Bud persisted, his mind on his mother. "Why didn't *you* marry her yourself? That'd have kept her from—"

"I never had a chance, younker," Hardrock said soberly. "Even way back yonder when me'n your dad were just young bucks like you, an' came out here to Clear Fork, an' your maw was the school teacher in Clear Fork. We were both sparkin' her and she picked your father. He—"

"He asked me first," Mary Murdoc cut in. Then she turned and ran from the room. Bud looked after her and grinned.

"Go on, Hardrock," he urged. "She's a widder again! Go on in there and ask her."

He watched while the big man went through the door, then turned his face to the wall and went to sleep, a satisfied grin on his face.

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COYOTE CREDIT - TRAP

(*Continued from page* 61)

his order, far as I can see."

"You mean, how was I to know for sure they were bad ones, aside from using Chester Stryker's name?"

Jim said, "Somethin' like that."

"Well—" Charlie grinned. "It's like this. I tried my number-one credit trick on them. I traded a couple of sides of fat, undersmoked bacon for two good ones. A fellow that is honest and intends paying for his groceries would call me on that and this tall one nearly did. But he didn't. He let it go and I exchanged the bacon, giving him the poor quality stuff. I knew right away he never expected to come in my store again. He wanted to get those supplies tied on his horse and make tracks for cover so that he could cook up a bait of grub."

"You should of told me right off."

"I tried to, Jim, but you were so mad you wouldn't listen."

"How'd you know where to find them?" he demanded.

"If I were starving for food and rest, I'd hit for the first good hiding spot."

"And so you rode right up here, bracing them two bad actors," Jim said quietly with a note of respect in his voice.

Charlie smiled modestly. "Sure."

"How'd you know they wouldn't get a hand on them saddle guns?" Jim grinned broadly and glanced around at his possemen as though to say, "Now I've got him."

"Yah, sure," Jenson put in. "Those carbines are loaded with good cartridges." He jerked the trigger on one of them that he had taken from a saddle boot.

At the flat crack of the Winchester, Charlie's smile vanished. "A—a man has to take a chance," he said weakly.

The possemen laughed and grinned at one another. Jim took Charlie's borrowed six-shooter then and swung out the loading gate, spinning the cylinder.

"One cartridge in here," he said chuckling. "And that's shot off!"

Charlie's face turned white for a moment, then his eyes twinkled and he offered the sheriff his plug of Apple. "Guess I'd better leave this law business to you, Jim," he said. "Anyhow, I've got to get back to the store. Some poor hungry fellow might be waiting for groceries—and credit."

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VALLEY CLEAN-UP

(*Continued from page 70*)

HE wadded the paper up and shoved it into a pocket.

"Johnny!" he called hoarsely. "Look after things.

He stumbled out into the morning sunshine. The fear in him for Maudie's safety was like an iron clamp about his heart. There seemed but one thing to do—find Elton Pelley and tell him he could have the newspaper. Speck was whipped and he knew it. He was like old Inky Ingold. As long as he had only himself to be afraid for, he felt no fear. But when another was involved, someone he thought more of than himself, it was a different matter.

He turned toward the Oasis. If Pelley wasn't there, likely someone in the Oasis could tell him where to find the man. Someone like Sid Switzer.

His eyes moved up to the second story of the Oasis. The window shades were drawn against the morning sun. Something flashed in the bright light and caught his eye. Something fastened on a window shade. He stared upward and the flash came again—the shape of it was etched out clearly. A shape like a small horseshoe! It was the glittering pin he'd given Maudie Hansen when she'd been just a kid!

The hot blood pounded through his head and a great hope stirred in him. He went on past the batwing, rounded the corner of the building and headed along its side toward the alley. In the alley he moved toward the rear door. It was locked. He tried a low window. It, too, was locked. He lifted his gun and smashed the glass and climbed into the smelly back room.

The crash brought the barkeep into the room. Before the man could call out, Speck hit him a slashing blow with the gun barrel. The barkeep crumbled up and lay still.

A narrow board stairs led to the upper floor. Speck took the steps two at a time on his toes. He shoved into a narrow hallway. It ran the length of the building and was packed with shadows. A door opened on the right and Doc Toft, blinking at the dimness, stepped through it. Before the man could open his mouth, Speck had shoved the gun against his paunchy stomarh. Doc shut his mouth with a soft grunt.

Speck hit him then, a stiff left to the point of the chin, and the medico soundlessly folded up in the doorway. Speck ran to the door of the end room. It was locked. He put a shoulder against it and shoved.

The thin wood around the lock splintered and he fell into the room.

He rolled over and leaped to his feet. Maudie Hansen lay on an iron cot, bound and gagged. Her eyes were wide and fixed on the door behind him. He caught the fear in them, leaped to one side and spun around just as a gun blasted and a bullet tugged at his right sleeve.

He shot the man in the doorway before he knew for sure that it was Jip Beeler.

The lanky sheriff fell back into the shadowy hall and lay still.

Still clutching the smoking Colt in his right hand, Speck fished out his pocketknife with his left, opened the blade with his teeth and cut the ropes that bound the girl. Footsteps pounded along the hall. He shoved Maudie off the cot and rolled the mattress over her; then faced the door.

THE footsteps stopped just beyond the door and Sid Switzer said harshly, "There're three of us out here, Spalding! Come out with your hands up, or we'll come after you with guns blasting!" Then the man's voice turned soft and deadly. "The girl might get hurt, Spalding."

Speck glanced at the piled-up mattress. Maudie's head poked out from beneath it. She had the gag off and her hazel eyes shot sparks of anger.

"Don't worry about me, Speck," she said. "Switzer's behind all the trouble in Candle Springs. Get him!"

He started toward the door, and she hissed, "Be careful!"

A gun blasted and a bullet tore through the length of the hall and crashed out the end window.

"I got you covered!" Johnny Fay's voice bellowed.

That was when Speck lunged into the

hall. He and Johnny had Switzer, Doc Toft and Elton Pelley between them. Pelley's gun hand came up and Speck shot him through the chest. Johnny's six roared again and Doc Toft's right hand went limp, and the fat medico floundered against the wall, cursing. That left Sid Switzer on his feet.

The man's thin, dark face filled with maniacal fury. He flung a shot at Johnny and then turned on Speck. His gun came down and exploded and Speck felt the bullet burn his lean ribs. He let Switzer have it then, a bullet between the eyes. The man fell forward on his face.

Johnny Fay limped up, blood oozing from his right leg, a grin on his homely face. He aimed his gun at Doc Toft.

"Don't shoot!" Toft panted. "I had to do what I did. I owed Switzer a gambling debt. He made me poison old Tribble. He made me try to poison you, Johnny. He made me go to Hansen's house this morning and tell the girl her pa was sick, so's she'd come down here. I didn't want to do none of these things!"

"Yeah?" Speck said harshly. "How about the cattle-rustling?"

"Jip Beeler was at the head of that," Toft panted. "Nights when he was supposed to be guarding the range, he was helping his men steal cattle. Switzer was the big boss."

"Who killed Sheriff Atkins?" Speck asked.

"Jip. Slammed the old man's head against the safe."

"Doc," Speck rasped, "you'll hang as sure as—"

The fat medico turned, shoved past Johnny and dived for the stairs. He stumbled, missed the railing and went crashing to the floor below. When Speck and Johnny looked down, they saw Doc Toft lying below, his head at a queer angle.

"He won't hang," Johnny said flatly. Then he grinned and added, "Good thing I followed yuh here, Speck."

Elton Pelley stirred and groaned. Speck bent over him and the man opened his eyes.

"Switzer promised me," he said thickly, "money—"

His eyes closed and he died with a harsh gasp.

Speck went back into the room where

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he'd found Maudie, reached behind the blind and got the horseshoe pin. When he turned, Maudie was standing behind him. She smiled faintly.

"So you saw it," she said. "I prayed that you would. They didn't keep me tied up when someone was in the room with me. Once, Doc Toft dozed and I attached the pin to the shade. He almost caught me—only he didn't know what I was doing. He thought I was trying to open the window."

Just then Johnny Fay stuck his head into the room. What he saw made him quickly withdraw. Even if he was Speck Spalding's best friend, he reckoned he had no business horning in while Speck was kissing Maudie and holding on to her like he never expected to let her go again.

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INDIAN MAGICIANS

By Will Nichols

SOME years ago, the "medicine show" was a familiar feature of the American rustic scene.

The origin of these medicine shows may be traced to the Indians. In many tribes, the medicine men would advertise their professional prowess by means of regular performances at which they would do tricks designed to impress their audiences with their marvelous and supernatural powers. The most famous medicine-men magicians were those of the Arikara, or Rees, who

flourished at one time in thirty-odd villages along the Missouri River.

The Arikara magicians would hold ceremonies that lasted for days, and were so popular that they were called "the opera" by the white traders.

Usually the Missouri River medicine shows would be held at night, the performers illuminated by the center fire in the main lodge. However, they were often held outdoors in daylight.

Many of the tricks were such as are performed by present-day routine stage magicians. Such a one was placing a gourd beneath a buffalo robe, stamping the gourd to pieces, and then lifting the robe to show the vessel still intact. Another was placing corn meal between the folds of a buffalo robe and then unfolding it to reveal that all the meal had mysteriously disappeared.

But some of the tricks of illusion were easily on a par with the most amazing ever executed by the most skilled magicians in history. Some medicine men would cut off an arm, brandish it around and then toss it to the audience. When it landed, it would prove to be a buffalo leg. Retrieving it, the magician would replace it against the stump and it would become his arm again. Others could stick a skewer through their tongues, gorily cut it off, and replace it with no damage done.

The most spectacular of the Arikara tricks was the one in which the medicine man's head would be cut off with a sword. While the detached head was carried about for all to see, the bloody, headless performer would dance about the lodge. Then the head would be brought back and placed backwards on the neck. After a moment, the head would suddenly swivel around into the proper position. The medicine man would rub his bleeding neck with his hand and lo! He would be completely unscarred and as good as new.

All the above facts, which of course seem incredible, were undoubtedly tricks of illusion involving a sort of mass hypnotic suggestion—similar to the powerful mass hypnosis of Hindu fakirs with their rope tricks.

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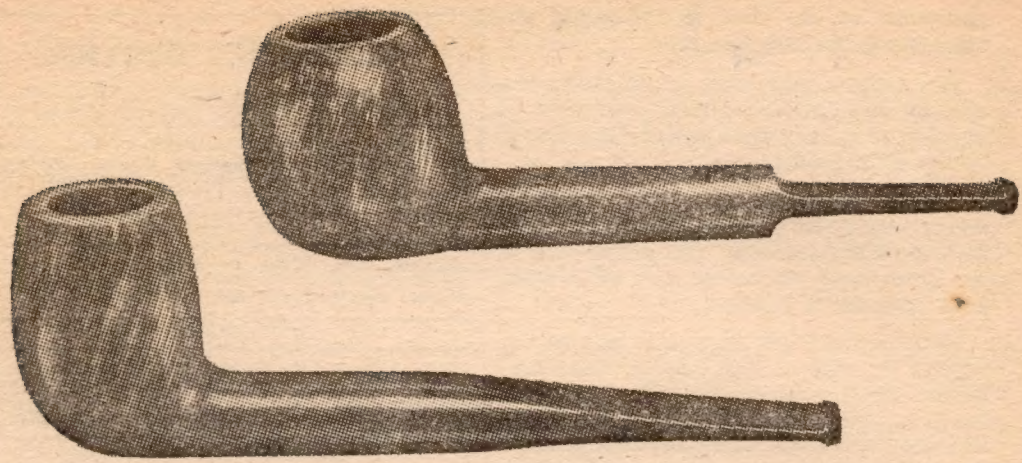

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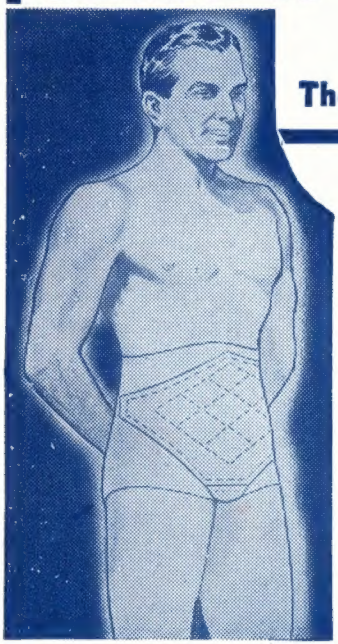

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"A few weeks ago I received the Appliance you made for me. Wouldn't do without it now. My fellow workers notice how much better I can do my work and get around over these ships—and believe me, the work in a Navy shipyard is anything but easy. I never lose a day's work now."—J. A. Comer, 1505 Green Ave., Orange, Texas.

Perfect Relief—Full Satisfaction

"Your truss gives FULL SATISFACTION. I feel it my moral duty to testify to the world:—(A)—That I have been ruptured 45 years. (B)—was operated on scientifically ten years ago when 76 years of age; but the rupture returned soon. Have tried everything; but only now do I find PERFECT RELIEF in your appliance."—Lee R. Stroud, 601 E. Grove St., Kaufman, Texas.

Patented AIR-CUSHION Support Gives *Wonderful Protection*

Think of it! Here's a surprising yet simple-acting invention that helps Nature support the weakened muscles gently but securely, day and night. Thousands of grateful letters express heartfelt thanks for relief from pain and worry,—results beyond the expectations of the writers. What is this invention—how does it work? Will it help me? Get the complete, fascinating facts on the Brooks Air-Cushion Appliance—send now for *free* Rupture Book.

Cheap—Sanitary—Comfortable

Rich or poor—ANYONE can afford to buy this remarkable, LOW-PRICED rupture invention! But look out for imitations and counterfeits. The Genuine Brooks Air-Cushion truss is never sold in stores or by agents. Your Brooks is made up after your order is received, to fit your particular case. You buy direct at the low "maker-to-user" price. The perfected Brooks is sanitary, lightweight, inconspicuous. Has no hard pads to gouge painfully into the flesh, no stiff, punishing springs, no metal girdle to rust or corrode. It is GUARANTEED to bring you heavenly comfort and security or it costs NOTHING. The Air-Cushion works in its own unique way—softly, silently doing its part in providing protection. Learn what this patented invention may mean to you—send the coupon quick!

C. E. BROOKS, Inventor

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No . . . don't order a Brooks now . . . FIRST get the complete, revealing explanation of this world-famous rupture invention. THEN decide whether you want to try for the comfort—the wonderful degree of freedom—the security—the blessed relief that thousands of men, women and children have reported. They found our invention the answer to their prayers! And you risk NOTHING in making the TEST, as the complete appliance is SENT ON TRIAL. Surely you owe it to yourself to investigate this no-risk trial. Send for the facts—now—today—hurry! All correspondence strictly confidential.

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